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The Village

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ORIENT PAPERBACKS

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Published by
Orient Paperbacks
(A Division of Vision Books Private Limited)
36-C, Connaught Place, New Delhi-110001

Cover painting by Amrita Sher-Gil
Courtesy : National Gallery of Modern Art

Text printed by
Kay Kay Printers
150-D, Kamlanagar, Delhi.

Cover printed by
Shiksha Bharati Press
G.T. Road, Shahdara, Delhi.

I

NIHAL SINGH walked out of the hall of Nandpur Station on a pair of sturdy legs which had grown cramped during the ten-mile journey from the district town of Manabad in a crowded third-class carriage.

As he emerged into the neat, sun-soaked compound, strewn with broken white pebbles and smelling of the fresh tar that was painted round the rim of the red-brick building, he halted for a moment to see if any of his sons were there, for usually one of them came to meet him. But there was no one in the courtyard, except the railway porter's wife, who was feeding her chickens with stale lentils.

He threw down the thick puthwar shoes which he had carried in his left hand lest they should be lost in the train, negotiated his feet into them with a mild frown on his swarthy, weather-beaten face, handsome in spite of the forty lines of seventy-odd years on his brow. And, adjusting the shapeless bundle tied up in a knotted white sheet on his bent back, he gripped his staff in his right hand and started on his walk to the village, a mile and a half away.

The engine of the train from which he had alighted shrieked a sudden shrill whistle. The old man started. He paled and then, shaking from head to foot with nervous agitation, he shuffled on his legs as if he had urinated with fear, and finally stopped dead. Involuntarily he looked back towards the station. Then he smiled, embarrassed, glanced furtively around to discover whether anyone could have noticed him being frightened at a whistle which had become familiar enough since the branch line from Manabad had been extended that way, put his hand to his heart and blew a hot breath.

Having drunk its fill of water from the elephant-nosed pump, the engine belched noisily, shrieked again and began to move forward with vigorous phuff-phuff, leaving a cloud

of smoke to trail along the fields.

The old man steadied himself and, after a furtive half-glance back to the floating clouds of dark soot, he started off towards the village.

'Bapu.' The voice of Lal Singh fell on his ears, as his youngest son came racing towards him, flushed and panting.

'O come, Lalu, son,' Nihal Singh breathed heavily, still a little off his guard. 'This machine is like the Devil. How it made my heart jump! Wah Guru! Wah Guru! And the smoke it belches is so bad for the fields. Just blights away the harvest. I am glad I have no fields near the railroad. To think of our young corn blasted by the foul smoke and sparks of the stone coal which these injans belch forth day and night, night and day! The age of darkness has come!'

'But look how bravely it phuff-phuffs away to the north,' said Lalu, with a mischievous boyish smile on his ruddy, handsome face, which was almost a replica of the face with which the old man had confronted the world when he was young. 'I wouldn't mind being a driver and going to Delhi and Bombay with it. And whatever you say, Bapu, you know you would not like to be carrying all those sacks of grain to Manabad and Sherkot on your back. The bullock-cart drivers stop twenty times, to smoke and to feed the bullocks, and they often get drunk and take two days and a night sometimes. But you can send anything to town in an hour by the goods train.'

'You are a fool,' snorted Nihal Singh impatiently. 'You don't think of the hire, and the bribes you have to pay to the Babu at the godown each end, and the difficulty of smuggling anything past those fiends of the customs. You can take a bullock cart into town by a hundred devious ways. . . .'

'Acha, Bapu, have it your own way,' said Lalu good-humouredly. 'But come, let me relieve you of that bundle on your back. It must be heavy.'

'No, son, it is only a small weight,' said the old man and shook his head. He lifted his eyes, undimmed by age, to the sun, which had already risen high in the eastern sky.

But he was dazed by the vast resplendence of the sharp rays which were shooting through the sparse foliage of the kikar trees on the roadway and, withdrawing his gaze, he rested it on the flat land.

There was a tense silence between father and son for a moment, and they hastened their steps, as if impelled by the motion of the train which was running swiftly across the land on their left. A fine bite was in the air just where the short, well-paved stretch of the railway road ended and gave place to the dusty, rutted, open highway, and a robin sang among the chorus of twittering sparrows and chattering crows.

'It is such a relief from that congested town,' said Nihal Singh, breathing a long breath and feeling easier. 'The air and water are good and clean here.'

And he glanced at the profusion of dead leaves that lay in the pits of the road, covered with dust and bespattered with mud, and at the ochre and golden and yellow colours of the hanging boughs of jamans and jacks, and the neem trees which stretched from where the line of kikars gave place to half a dozen stunted poplars, thick with long snaky, clinging creepers. It would soon be autumn!

And his gaze swept from the cactus and the blackthorn in the strips of wasteland by the road, which was its usual grey, to the willows by the small canal which watered the rolling banks of cultivated fields. The trees were shedding their leaves, although the groves round the wells in the distance were still green.

'A cold breeze, a little rain, and the trees will be stripped,' the old man muttered more to himself than to Lalu, as if he were enraptured at the thought of the season. 'And by the grace of Wah Guru, we will be getting ready for the harvest. . . . But I don't know how things will turn out.' He fretted, his rapture fading into a confused dubiousness.

'Why not, Bapu?' asked Lalu eagerly.

'Because that suit of ours about the land is still unsettled, son,' said Nihal Singh, 'And the cotton and maize which I sold in the market yesterday haven't fetched enough

even to pay the rent that is due. Only Wah Guru knows what is in our kismet. . . .' And his brows contracted and, with eyes averted, he looked around.

His glance fell on the little yellow, flaxy, woollen balls of the flowers of a thorny bush which were scattered on the ground. And he felt a faint tingling in his eyes to see their bright lights vying with the mighty morning, as they flourished in the dust. And he walked along taking a melancholy pleasure in the fall of the leaves, the shedding of the flowers and the grace of the oncoming change of season whose harbinger was the timorous breeze rustling across his face.

'You should let me go to sell the harvest, Bapu, next time,' said Lalu. 'I'll soon get that Vakil into hand if you take me with you to see him.'

'No son, these things have to be handled with tact,' said Nihal Singh.

'Tact or no tact,' burst Lalu pugnaciously, 'I will punch their heads and teach them the lesson of their lives. They all take advantage of you, the swine, because you are an old man. . . .'

'If we can use our hands, son, some of those banias can use their tongue,' said Nihalu, with grudging praise. 'And can there be a market without a bania? . . . But it is true I am getting old,' he continued fretfully, and hung his head down as they moved along a narrow pathway by the ditch of a hedgeless field. And he muttered, 'It is strange how every time I go to town I feel nearer death.'

'It is because you get too tired haggling with those crafty swine there,' said Lalu querulously. 'I have told you, Bapu, they take advantage of old age.'

'Yes, it is true. I am getting old,' Nihal Singh repeated, 'but I have never liked the town of Manabad which the rapers of their mothers, the ferungis, have built. I have never liked them or their ways. They destroyed the Sikh Raj and favoured thieves like Harbans Singh, who betrayed our race and killed the righteous.'

'The fault of the traitors then, and of Ranjit Singh, the one-eyed,' Lalu said pertly.

'Ohe nahin, ohe nahin!' burst the old man impatiently.

'We would have beaten those red-faces if. . . .'

And for a moment his anger choked him, as he recalled the funnily-dressed, long-whiskered goras whom he had met face to face fifty years before. 'I was not a good-for-nothing like you at your age,' he chided, 'I was drawing full pay in the army of the Panth.'

At the mention of the faith he raised his right hand to his turban and touched the sacred garland of marigolds he had received at the Sikh temple at dawn and put near the bun on the top of his head, according to the familiar habit. The flowers were cool to the touch. He adjusted them in his turban devoutly, dropped his hand and swung along, his heart full of the sumptuous feeling that the archaic rite of bending his head to the Holy Book before beginning the day's work gave him, even though it had staled through years to a mere ritual. And as if this little ceremony of touching the flowers had deepened his sense of devotion and his memories, he poured out of the timeworn story of his youthful adventures.

'Oh son, you don't know how the Panth was betrayed at Aliwal. The Khalsa had drunk nectar from the foot of the Durbar Sahib and vowed to be united as one man after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. If it hadn't been for those vile ministers who turned traitors, the Punjab would never have been conquered by the ferungis. The Panchayat found letters written by the vizier Jawahar Singh to the angrezi jarnels. And every soul in the kingdom cried out for a just retribution to be meted out to this evil-doer . . . .'

His heart palpitated with the righteous indignation into which he always worked himself up in an effort to convince his irreverent son. 'That was justice,' he flared. 'These ferungis carry on a suit for years, transferring it from magistrate to magistrate, till the lawyers have eaten away all one's money.'

'That is our fault,' said Lalu laughing. 'You let me tackle this case of ours and I shall soon twist the necks of our enemies.'

'Ohe son,' said Nihal Singh, carried away by his feelings and ignoring his son's trifling humour. 'Oh, that was

the age of truth! What a splendrous sight the wives of Jawahar Singh made when they burnt themselves on his pyre and became satis! The sepoys spoiled the sanctity of the sacrifice by behaving insanely, looting the women's jewellery and snatching their ear-rings out of their ears.'

'And that was an age of truth then, Bapu?' teased Lalu.

'It was that crime, perhaps, which brought the doom of the Khalsa,' Nihal cried out. And he hesitated for a moment, as if to fix his vision of that fateful day on the banks of the Sutlej when the battle of Aliwal was fought. Then he began again, talking more to himself than to his son.

'The man who is slain cannot walk to his horse,' he muttered, 'and those women were dead. But we felt neither pity nor remorse in our resentment at the betrayal by Jawahar Singh. We served the cause as the Gurus had ordained, with a sat bachan. I carried muskets and cut grass for the horses. I rowed the boats across the river, cooked and scrubbed the utensils in the army's kitchens. Ohe, your Bapu has done some deeds, son, he has done some deeds! But the ferungis had more guns and we had traitors at our head. At Mudki, the Khalsa frightened off the red faces by stuffing the cannon with mustard seed, which made the noise of a hundred bombs in bursting. But at Aliwal—ohe, I don't know what happened to our kismet that day! But I did some deeds, son, I did some deeds! I went reconnoitring into the enemy camp. I was not afraid though it was dark. And I rushed upon the sentry who stood sleepily guarding the bell top tent. He was the first man I killed in my life. And I would have torn through the tent and murdered all of them. But that dead sentry fell with a thud and the noise disturbed the ferungis who were eating double roti and tea inside. And I flew back, son, triumphant, triumphant, triumphant.'

A flushed warmth crept up to his face as he became charged with the glow of his own words. And he walked briskly, glancing around the land full of the sun's laughter and nodding to a neglected field of stunted roots. For

though his memories were like the wisps of breeze, disjointed and sharp-edged, they came across the curve of a continuous strain of passion which he liked to believe was a resurgence of the passion he had felt that day.

'How the Khalsa faught!' he cried, 'oh child, you should have seen. Bale! Bale! And, when they could not fight any more because they were wounded, they drowned themselves in the river . . . And but for the betrayal of Jarnel Teja Singh, the victory would have been ours. In the hand-to-hand fight, we killed hundreds of ferungis and kept them at bay.'

'That was Teja Singh, father of Harbans Singh, Bapu?' asked Lalu, hiy curiosity aroused by the local detail.

'Yes, son, the swine who founded the cursed family of this landlord of Nandpur. And after his flight, the sepoys were pushed back to the river, only to find the boat bridge broken. The traitor had broken it lest he should be followed by the ferungis. But those who had drunk the nectar at the foot of the Durbar Sahib did not seek to follow him. They could have swum back if they had wanted, but instead, they showed their broad chests to the enemy's guns, and, swearing by the Guru Granth, rushed to their death. And some of us upheld the flame of truth, in spite of the odds. There was the noble Jarnel Sham Singh, almost the incarnation of Guru Gobind Singh. He braved the thickest of the fray, flashing past like lightning on his white mare, in flowing silk robes. And they say he died with the name of the Gurus on his lips.'

'And I braved the storm too, son,' he continued after taking a deep breath. 'I was in the thick of the battle too. And then I felt a shooting pain in my leg and fell stunned by the side of Kharak Singh, the cousin of your grandmother's brother. I only came to in the tent of the angrez dakdar with a red beard and a smile exactly like your grandfather's.'

'But these angrez log are crafty! "Sat Sri Akal," the Sahib said to me, patting me on the back. Now where had this dakdar learnt the call of the Panth! They know us better than we know ourselves.'

'But he was kind and I accepted the oath of allegiance to the Sarkar when he pressed me and forgave them. Only I can never forget that those ferungis took the Punjab by a freud. To make Teja Singh a landlord! Think of the iniquity, people! We lost ten of the twenty-five acres we had inherited, through that thuggery by the Sarkar. And after the traitor's death, his son, Harbans, has the effrontery to take another five by producing a false deed supposed to be signed by your grandfather in lieu of debt. Zulum! How lies prosper! Why, my father would not have spat on Teja Singh's beard! . . . The filthy arrogant swine! Harbans Singh and his scoundrelly family! Oh, how I hate them, how I loathe them, the thieving, robbing, extortionate hounds! But I will see that the wrong is righted! I will fight this suit about my five acres as I have fought it for ten years!' And he stamped his foot on the earth so that as he walked his legs tottered and he almost lost his balance.

Lalu was afraid that the old man might fall, and stretched his hand out with clumsy good will to help him. Although the tale had become stale by repetition, still, it never failed to move him. And yet he felt gagged by the conventional respect for old age and could find no words to express his emotion.

He looked about him and saw patches of the burnt red earth of unploughed fields brooding in a smouldering haze. Then he cast a long glance at the white highway which shone clearly before him till it faded into the distance.

'I will wreak my revenge! I will show them a thing or two!' the old man flared in a sudden impetuous burst of rage. 'Never mind if I die in the attempt! And if it is still not settled then, if you are born of my seed, you will roar forth the call of manhood after me, and destroy the enemies who have deprived us of our birthright!'

Lalu raised his head and saw his father's wheat-coloured face illuminated with the glow of the ripest ear of corn. The exertion involved in h , outbursts seemed to have choked him, so that saliva overflowed from his half-open lips as on the mouth of a mad dog. And he breathed deep as the fine stretch of his emotions broke into a spluttering cough

and brought water to his eyes.

'Give me the bundle, Bapu,' Lalu reiterated. 'It must be heavy on your back.'

Nihal Singh halted for a moment, shook his head stubbornly, and stood supporting his ribs on the handle of his staff. A thick spittle rolled across his tongue and he spat it hurriedly on the dust. He inhaled a short breath, opened his eyes and sighed. For, peeping beyond the curtain of his fury, he seemed suddenly to have seen the darkness.

But the earth spread peacefully about them, exhaling a damp odour where it had been recently upturned for the sowing of the new harvest.

'Shame, shame! Thou hast not yet seen the God,' Nihal Singh muttered as the premonition in his soul seemed to gather depth from the fragrant stillness. And he sighed with devout humility to summon Divine Grace, and resumed his steps, muttering, 'Oh Lord! So low in scale of life, so mean my performance.'

'Are you not feeling well, Bapu?' Lalu said diffidently, hoping that his father would not interpret his inquiry as a lack of respect.

'Death above thy head and before thee is the great
World Sea of thought and desire,'

the old man sang with exaggerated devotion, to quieten his son and soothe his own conscience.

But to Lalu the Almighty was invisible and the old man seemed pathetically forlorn, unworthy and unforgiven.

'Let me take the weight off your back, Bapu,' the boy pleaded again.

'No, son, no,' Nihal Singh said stubbornly. 'I am getting old, son, just that. I am getting old.'

He repeated the words as if to efface the effect of the prayer songs, so as not to repeat the word 'Death' at any cost. For in the passage from youth through middle age upwards, he had, like most hard-willed, energetic men, become used to thinking of himself as immortal.

'You must go and bend your forehead before Mahant Nandgir, Bapu,' said Lalu, laughing to disguise the

mockery in his voice.

'I don't know what is the matter, son,' Nihal Singh began. 'It couldn't be because I drank water on an empty belly first thing this morning, because I ate some puris and kara, and drank a pot full of whey outside the temple to counteract the effects of the palmful of water.'

'You shouldn't have taken the deal at the market to heart,' said Lalu. 'You knew long before you went to Manabad that the price of grain is falling. And as for the suit, well, you know that fleecing Balmukand. He calls himself a lawyer when he has not the sense of a parrot!'

'But I wish this issue would end,' the old man said. 'If only that scavenging crow had repeated the arguments I told him, the magister would have given the verdict in our favour long ago. . . . And I do wish we could get back that land, because only then can we pay off the debts incurred from Seth Chaman Lal on the marriages of your three sisters, Ishri, Meli, Aqi and your eldest brother, Sharm Singh. . . . But it is all in the hands of Wah Guru.'

'Han, we should devote ourselves to the service of God and his holy men,' said Lalu ironically. 'We will have all the blessings if we earn merit!'

'Ohe, don't blaspheme, fool!' protested Nihal Singh. 'God who has soaked us will dry us again.'

'Call on God, but row away from the rocks,' said Lalu. 'I will take this pathway to the Power House and see if the Mistri has mended the hoe, since I can't be of use bearing this bundle.'

'Don't sit talking there all day,' Nihalu shouted after him and went on his way.

The road was narrowing ahead of him towards the pukka bridge of the new canal that had been opened to irrigate the region between the waters of the Ravi and the Chanab, by order of George Fifth when he was crowned Emperor of Hindustan, at the Delhi Durbar. It had only meant a rise in the taxes for Nihal Singh, and he had not taken kindly to the roaring red Power House stuffed with machinery which they were building to produce electricity out of water. He couldn't get the hang of the infernal

machines of the iron age, though, as his son was always telling him, they were mighty cunning and worked wonders.

He felt a sharp chill as he heard the swish of the falling water. His limbs seemed to be crumbling like a soft mound of earth. The cold weather was setting in.

He walked at a quicker pace.

But the hulking shape of the landlord's bullock cart came into view, loaded with fodder. He smiled grimly as he cast his eyes over the forms of the two lean oxen, for he knew that, in spite of the colossal wealth that the leprous-faced Harbans Singh had inherited and acquired, he was not averse to sending a cartful of cattle-fodder to the market for sale, even though it meant starving his own cattle.

He edged away to the border of the road and balanced himself precariously on a boulder, to let the cart pass without splashing mud or covering him with dust. But the bullocks took some time to drag the heavy wheels through the ruts in the road, though they were being mercilessly goaded by Goonga, the hefty Mussulman driver, with clean shaven head and blue and red loincloth.

Nihal Singh shifted on his feet and shouted : 'Ohe, hurry then, hurry up and pass!'

But now the bullock on the right of the shaft tried to see Nihal Singh's form as if it had spotted its master's lifelong foe, and it withdrew its neck from the yoke. Goonga shook the reins and pulled them hard. Then, catching hold of the frightened bullock's tail, he twisted it to the tune of 'may I wear shoes made of your hide, may you die, may your mother pass away!'

The bullock slipped into the yoke again. Then Goonga savagely kicked the backside of the other bullock, probed the offender with his goad, and, as they started moving, shouted : 'Sat Sri Akal, Baba Nihal Singh. Have you been to town?'

'May you live long, son,' said the old man, and, taking the cart in with his all-seeing eyes, he continued : 'I see that you are going there with corn concealed under the fodder.'

'You wouldn't grudge me a few sacks of grain from

that miser's barn, Baba, if you knew what niggardly hire he pays me,' said Goonga with a wink and a smile.

' "Half a loaf is better than a hungry belly," serve him right, the thug!' returned Nihal Singh, 'take as much as you can, my son. His ill-gotten wealth will be thieved by others just in this way.' And he proceeded onwards, urged by his malice into fresh vigour and a quicker pace.

A drove of donkeys came, however, trotting along the bridge over the canal, loaded with red bricks from the factory of Lala Bhagat Ram, the contractor. Perched up on a donkey, at the rear was Sheikhu, the young potter, who made pots no longer, but worked for a wage at the birck-baking ovens.

'Ohe, what a dust you are kicking up, son of an owl,' the old man shouted peevishly from a distance, because he wanted to hurry home and rest.

'Sat Sri Akal, Baba,' the boy said, respectfully accepting the rebuke, but still he struck the donkeys right and left with his merciless cudgel, so that the herd jumped into a dangerous canter. Nihal Singh shifted nervously, expecting at least two of them to be thrown over the bridge into the roaring cataract.

'Aren't you afraid of anything, devil?' the old man rebuked the potter boy as he passed. 'One of these asses might have kicked you and thrown you into the canal.'

'No, Baba Nihalu,' said the boy casually. 'I have often dived with Lal Singh into that cataract.'

'I will give Lalu such a beating for courting death,' said the old man working up a bluff of rage. But warming to his son's friend, he said, 'Where are you going with those bricks?'

'To the electric house,' the boy said.

'Oh,' said the old man, 'you will find Lalu there. He has just left me.'

'If you wait I will give you a lift home on one of these donkeys, or take your baggage, Baba,' said the boy.

'No son,' said the old man. 'May you live long. The village isn't far. I will push along.'

'Oh, Baba Nihalu, Sat Sri Akal,' called Uttam Singh,

the tall, black village architect who was engaged on the construction. 'Come and take a breather and look at our handiwork.'

'Han, Baba, come,' mocked Deep Singh, the young carpenter, 'come and have some angrezi wine. Come, I have some sherbet.'

'No, I shall get along now,' the old man called back. 'Men are their own devils, drinking angrezi wine and constructing evil machines.'

'Ohe, come, it won't sting you, the electricity,' called blunt old Miraj Din, the village blacksmith who was now also working on the Power House.

'No, brothers,' Nihal said. And he heaved the weight on his back and proceeded.

The road beyond the canal broadened and became even with the ploughed fields which spread for miles and miles to the rim of the brown hills that talked vaguely to the sky on the east and north-east of Nandpur.

And walking along this road, Nihal Singh sensed a kinship with the familiar earth. He felt the invisible warmth of the sheltered lives in the village where he was respected. He sniffed the air as if it were nectar and gazed upon the landscape as if it were heaven full of the ineffable bliss of life, full of men and women and children and animals and vegetables and flowers. Only the deep red pits of cinder and the mounds of burnt clay near the brick factory blighted the view. But now he accepted that desecrated part of the fields also as the counterpart of the ploughed land, as a nether world, because it had been established years ago, and had become part of the landscape of the village. His love radiated on everything.

The sun was licking the sky with a long tongue of fire and blowing a hot breath across the earth now, and the old man walked under cover of the mulberry trees that lined the way.

Beyond the dilapidated caravanserai, beyond the murky pond which shone a pure azure against the dam of rubbishy manure, the mud-huts of the village were defining their

contours. It was curious, Nihal Singh thought, that they seemed embedded in the earth from a distance, while, as you got near them, they loomed large, larger than the sky.

As he left the main path, however, and took a short cut full of puddles, across the fields scattered with drying and decaying dung, broken pitchers, ashes, rags and bits of iron, he saw that it was the new-fashioned three and four storeyed big brick house of the landlord, the sahukar, the confectioner and the other shopkeeper that spoilt the contours of the township for him.

'Tohe, tohe, dog,' he called as he saw Kalu, the black village dog, unpaid, uncared for, warden of the marshes, snuffling at a bone on the mountain of rubbish and rotting garbage.

Kalu left his bone and ran up to the old man with great enthusiasm and affection.

It was lucky to meet a black dog before going or coming from anywhere, his wife always said.

'Come, son,' the old man shouted. 'Come, I will give you some milk to drink : milk or whey, or would you like meat?'

But Kalu had just seen a gay-coloured, full-plumaged peacock alight on the mound of manure that was his much coveted kingdom, and he ran for it like a lean hound after a rabbit, and sent the bird shrieking into the air.

'Ohe, budmash, ohe, budmash!' called the old man, his heart jumping eager and fast for fear of the bird's danger.

Relieved to see the bird escape into the air, he took the corner by the tree trunk to which wayside travellers tied their mounts while resting, and entered the main bazaar of the village.

In his concern for the life of the peacock, he had forgotten to lift the lapel of his shirt to his nose to avoid inhaling the smell of tobacco which the Muhammadan arains cultivated nearby and dried. For, to the devout Sikh, the slightest smell of tobacco was anathema, and the smoke of it poison. He made a belated effort to guard his nose with the palm of his hand, and hurried past the straw-roofed

barn in which the withered leaf of tobacco hung like washing on a line.

This sudden alacrity seemed to make him dizzy, and he rushed by the porch under the bearded banyan tree which was the village centre, and took a short cut through a gulley to avoid passing through the bazaar, lest he should have to answer any greetings.

A couple of children who sat relieving themselves in a gutter by the weavers' lane rushed up to him and said : 'Baba Nihalu, give us a pice.'

'Let go, let go, son,' he called, heaving a sigh and straining hard till his legs seemed to leave his body behind.

He was feeling ill. He hoped he hadn't been noticed. He might collapse and people would be inconvenienced and troubled. And he didn't want to trouble them, didn't want to be a burden on anyone in his old age.

He took a deep breath and sought to muster all his strength for the last little lap. His brain wheeled in a circle of fire, but he still went forward.

'Let me not die yet, O God,' he said to himself as he sped along, 'let me not die. My pilgrimage is not yet ended.'

The luminous birds of his eyes flew towards the sun, but the showers of the bright rays sent them back in a panic, and for a moment they were enveloped in utter darkness. Then they opened their wings furtively and flew across the uneven gulley towards his house.

He willed all the strength of his body into his desperate stride, and took the crumbling corners that led past the crowing cocks and clucking hens to the well that stood outside the Sikh temple.

At length the hall of his house appeared before his eyes at the end of two intersecting lanes. He rushed into the shade behind the ornamented doors, perspiring profusely from head to foot.

'Mother, mother, Bapu has come back,' Kesari, the wife of his eldest son called shyly to her mother-in-law, from where she sat crocheting on a low hemp stool in the hall.

Nihal Singh passed through the large sun-baked courtyard by the open air kitchen to the barn where the family of six lived.

The tenderness of delirium came upon him and, patiently resting the load off his back, flinging the staff from his hand, he sighed and collapsed in a fainting fit on the bedstead that spread under the alcove.

His daughter-in-law rushed to him with a tumbler full of water.

His wife, Gujri, who had been baking bread in the oven at the farthest corner of the courtyard, came and fanned him with a broken fan of peacock feathers, and then rushed to get some medicine from among the row of earth pots in a corner of the barn where she kept corn, money, vegetables, turmeric, salt, mustard oil and herbs.

'I almost died,' Nihalu whispered, drinking a sip of water. 'I must get up and see how the boys are getting on. I told Lalu to hurry back to his work. And I must go and see the Mahant in the afternoon. . . .'

II

HOW FIRMLY her life was moored to him, Gujri thought, as she bore the midday meal for her husband and sons towards the well where they gathered for rest.

The edges of the large bronze tray balanced on the palm of her upraised hand glistened in the sun, and the heat streamed down her face, melting her body and mind so that her senses tingled with a shining agitation. She recalled the panicky feeling she had had when she had bent over her husband in the morning as he had collapsed on the bedstead.

'What if it really happened, though?' the question leapt to her mind, changing the colour of her face from its flushed ivory to a cold white. 'May God prevent such a thing from happening! We have brought up the family and kept the name of the house and earned the respect of the brotherhood, even though God has been punishing us for

something by sinking us more and more into debt,' she said to herself. 'But poverty does not matter so long as you have a big heart, and that, everyone knows the father of Sharm Singh has. His life is all that matters. . . .'

She inclined towards her fear of his death with the ache of a devotion which she had always substituted for love.

'The two younger boys will soon get married,' she brooded, 'and they will go off with their wives and divide the land that remains, and I will have to sit at the door-steps of their houses.'

'Oh no, God, don't let them split up the family,' she cried. 'Oh, God, I join my hands to you. . . .'

But the separation of the family suddenly seemed inevitable, as if it were already happening. She had thought over these problems so many times of late. She would have three new brick houses built in the corners of the courtyard for the boys. But the old barn she must keep intact. The ancients had built it themselves, built it strong against enemies, of mud, so that it might look humble and not excite the envy of the neighbours and authorities, and so that it might thwart the evil eye.

And perhaps she could try to keep her own dear son Lalu with her in it. She would get him a nice little wife who would be dutiful to her, and serve her in her old age. And they could inherit the ancestral property and also what she had managed to preserve of the ancestral jewellery.

The other two boys—she would not do badly by them. They should not have flimsy mud-huts, or cottages of twigs and leaves like those of the paupers of the village and menials. The family had not descended so low.

No. She would have two-storeyed houses built for them with blue flower-pots on the terraces, so that Harbans Singh and upstarts like the sahukar need not think that they alone could build new houses with decorations on the tops of the terraces. . . .

A rustling sense of satisfaction played softly on her skin, a sense of the prevalence of her person in the world. She scattered a smile on the sunshine and explored the

land, every patch of which was familiar. She bent her head in a beatific prayer : 'Blessed be everyone.' And she walked brooding along across the earth, which seemed to flower out in a welter of leafage where the mustard spread to rise in a chaos, where the hills stretched to groves, and lay empty and vast on the lengths of freshly ploughed fields, inanimate and unconscious, swept by the tide of the sun, and silent, so silent that there seemed to be something of death in them, so still that there lurked in the unfrequented dust tracks on their leafless vastness a profound sadness.

There, there they were, Sharm Singh and Dayal Singh, threshing, while her husband was sitting on the bedstead, half in the shade, half in the sun.

She hurried towards them. She was a stately figure as she walked up, inspite of the sixty years during which she had borne six children, and worked hard. Yet she looked strangely demure and innocent, her forehead burning with a light behind its lines, her eyes luminous within the shadows and the wrinkles round her fine lips opening in a candid pout which took determination from her long chin and tenderness from her sad, sagging, brown cheeks.

'Come, my sons, come and eat your meal,' she called. And then noticing that Sharm Singh was beating the straw too slowly with the flail, she said, 'Come, you must be tired, son. Come, Dayal Singha, I will rake the straw later and help you separate the chaff from the corn, for after noontide the wind will be blowing. Come, where is my Lalu?'

'Come, ohe, Lal Singha, ohe Lal Singha,' called Sharm Singh, her eldest son, a tall figure of forty with a stooping head, loosely turbaned over a pale face illuminated by a pointed red beard.

The earth seemed utterly still now except for the sound of a scythe which slashed the tall grass beyond the furrowed fields of Nihal Singh's main acres and the dull shi-a-shi of a washer-woman beating clothes on a slab of stone by the village tank at the foot of the mausoleum set up by Seth Chaman Lal in memory of his father, Gansham Das.

'Get up, ohe, my soul,' said Nihal Singh, heaving his bones, and he added his quota of strength to another of Sharm Singh's calls : 'Ohe, Lal Singha, ohe.'

From the burning shallows of the rich noon his voice was echoed back by the shrill crescendo of Lal Singh's answer, 'Coming, ohe, coming.'

'Do you want to go home, or will you eat with your father and brothers here?' Gujri asked Sharm Singh, as she laid down the plate and the jar of whey she had carried under her arm and wiped her shining face. She always felt a sudden hardening of her inside as she faced her eldest son. She was afraid of the bullying reticence which in him took the place of the family fullbloodedness. And therefore she always confronted him with an outspoken clarity to parry his silent aggressiveness.

'No,' he said, affecting a casual manner though he was hurt that his mother should offer him differential treatment.

Gujri began to sort out the food on three plates automatically, without further comment. Sharm Singh began to pour out the whey.

'The father of Sharm Singh,' she said, addressing her husband in the familiar, archaic convention, 'did you go to see anyone at Manabad and broach the matter of Dayal Singh's engagement?'

'They want an exchange of girls,' the old man answered, crossing his legs in readiness for the meal, but still muttering over his beads. 'The wife of Duni Chand told Beli Ram's mother that she would give her daughter to us if we could get the match of our Meli's eldest daughter, Puro, for Duni's youngest brother.'

'What wickedness!' Gujri flared. 'Why, we have not lost all our prestige yet, to go exchanging girls with them. We have had enough of these city girls.' And she sat still for a moment, her brows stretched and face taut with a flush of indignation.

'Acha, mother, give us that food,' said Sharm Singh, impatient at the reproach implied in her reference to city girls, for it was his wife from the city who was responsible for his mother's disgust. 'You know that it is difficult in

these days to get girls for our boys,' he added resentfully.

'That is because the shameless villagers are selling their daughters,' said Gujri, 'and there are no peasant girls left for our sons to marry. These city folk have raised their heads to the skies, they have neither religion left, nor shame—wanting exchanges!'

'But, mother, Dayal Singh is getting old,' said Sharm Singh. 'He is already thirty-five and will soon be too old to marry. We should try and persuade Meli's husband, Arjan, to.'

Go and eat your masters, go and do so,' said Gujri. 'And bring another spoilt bride to my door, who is used to eating fried bread and semolina in the morning, wants to wear embroidered clothes all day, and dies at the mention of work. . . .'

'Take the name of Wah Guru! Mention the name of Wah Guru!' sang Dayal Singh, coming up with the bullocks. He was a large, handsome man, baked a rich burnt brown, an everliving smile on his full lips and in his deep-set eyes. He tied the beasts to two pegs beside a manger and murmuring familiar phrases of the first verse of the Japji, he came towards the group. He noticed the tense resentment of Sharm Singh's glance, and his mother's tight-lipped silence, and asked, 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing, Dayal Singha,' Gujri said, 'nothing, my son.' and she handed him a tumbler of whey, passing another one to her husband. Her eyes had mellowed with tears and she looked up to her second son for sympathy. He was looking detachedly before him, with a soothing peace and goodness about him that was lucid and simple. She took calm from him, murmuring, 'Bless you!' as if in reverence to the light which she thought he had realized through constant worship.

'The Guru has said,' Dayal Singh continued in prose this time, more to himself than his mother : 'The hands and feet and skin when mud-besmeared are washed free of dirt by water; our vestures when soiled are cleaned by washing; but when the dirt of sins makes dark our mind, naught else but Thy Name can restore it to its fair transparency;

it needs to be washed by the love of Thy Name, O Lord.'

'Aai, Guruji, whose name is Truth,' mocked Lal Singh as he approached, in a voice that was muffled by the weight of the cattle-fodder on his head, 'come and relieve me of my burden. The bullocks can't live on hymns, you know, my brother.'

'Ohe, ohe,' said Nihal Singh, hurriedly breaking the stifled monologue that he breathed as he still told his beads.

'My son!' said Gujri with an affectionate pout, pouring another glass of whey. 'Look, he has come in the heat. And he must be hungry and thirsty. May I be his sacrifice!'

'Other sons of their mothers have also been working in the heat,' said Sharm Singh dryly. And then he turned to his youngest brother and said, 'I hope you have cut some fodder for the buffalo too, or else she will dry up soon.'

'Acha, misery, acha,' said Lal Singh, with a broad grin. 'What is there to eat today, mother?'

'Turnips,' mocked his eldest brother, before his mother could say anything.

'Those are for you,' returned Lal Singh, 'I will have the roasted brinjal!'

'Acha now, stop quarrelling with your eldest brother,' said Gujri.

'He started it, mother,' said Lalu with an appealing glance.

Gujri served the dishes she had apportioned to everyone except herself, according to the custom which still is observed by peasant women who eat only after their menfolk, often out of the remainders of the food left in the men's plates.

'At least wash your hands before eating,' said Sharm Singh.

'Whoever saw a lion wash his face?' the boy replied casually across a mouthful, making a pun of the second part of every Sikh name which means lion.

'Son, you ought to,' said Gujri.

'Mother, I washed my face and hands after I stopped work, and they couldn't have been soiled by the green grass

I carried,' said Lal Singh.

'You will die of fever one of these days,' bullied Sharm Singh, 'washing yourself with cold water when you are hot after working. Didn't they teach you this at school, your worthy masters? And you talk of having learned farming from books and try to give us lessons in cultivation.'

'How do you know that I hadn't rested?' said Lal Singh, trying to justify himself though he knew he was wrong. 'Anyhow, washing with cold water when I am perspiring doesn't affect me.'

'Oh no, you bear a charmed life,' said Sharm Singh cynically.

'Vay, let him eat in peace,' Gujri said, and then she called to Dayal Singh who had begun to chop up some of the fodder for the bullocks, 'Come, Dayal Singha, eat your food. It's getting cold.'

'What does food matter to the saints?' said Sharm Singh.

'At least he believes in service,' said Lalu.

Sharm Singh was thinking out a phrase in his slow-moving head. But Dayal Singh came up, and he kept, silent, as he too respected his younger brother.

'I hear you got tired, Bapu, on the way back from the town, said Dayal Singh with a filial piety that was more natural to him than the conventional practice of two thousand years had rendered it.

'Yes, son,' said Nihal Singh, who sat on his bed munching morsels of food hard with his toothless jaws. 'But it tires me nowadays, going to town. There are motucars and buggies and tongas toot-tooting their horns, And then the smoke of these injans! I don't like cities.'

'Han, Bapu,' said Dayal Singh, sitting down to his meal. 'But by the grace of Wah Guru you need not go any more. I shall go to sell the harvest next time, and Sharm Singh can attend to the case.'

'Have you finished the ploughing, boys?' asked Gujri.

No one replied for a moment as everyone's mouth was full of food.

'No, mother,' said Dayal Singh. 'There are about two

acres left, by the land of the Mahant.'

'And that can't be ploughed without a sharp point to the plough,' interposed Lal Singh, chewing a large morsel. 'I must fetch the old point which I left to be sharpened with Miraj Din, the blacksmith.'

'Give me a pot of whey, Gujriai,' said Harnam Singh, a cousin of the family, coming up, thick-set and hearty. 'Give me a tumbler of whey to cool my anger, as I have just come from the town of Sherkot, where the darkness has come.'

'What is the matter, Harnam Singh?' said Gujri. 'Why are you so huffed?'

'The darkness has come over the world, Gujriai,' he said, 'the darkness. Those people in the cities have raised their heads to the skies!'

'I know,' Gujri said. 'The Kaliyug has come. Children no longer respect their elders or listen to their advice. Husbands beat their wives. That drunkard husband of my Aqi beat her, and she couldn't even come here, because she had no money. I don't know what the world is coming to.'

'I don't know how you fared, Baba Nihalu,' said Harnam Singh, gathering his white tehmet around him as he took a pot of whey and sat down on the edge of the bedstead, 'but there are all kinds of ramps about grain at Sherkot. They say they have raised the tax on grain. And I am told that the Sarkar is buying up the harvest cheap and storing it in its granaries so that it can sell at a profit. The prices have fallen. How can they expect us to pay the taxes? And we all seem to be cutting each other's throats. Several of the peasants in the district were selling the last harvest so cheap in the market that I couldn't get a good price for mine.' And he raised the whey he held in his hand and gulped it in one breath.

'I can tell you, brother, it was no different in Manabad,' said the old man, flourishing his tooth-pick. 'There is going to be a famine so far as I can see. Prices are falling everywhere. But I couldn't stop to argue as I

wanted to see that thief of a vakil, Balmukand, about my cases. Since he has built a bungla here and bought a house in Manabad, he has become more and more mean. He thinks he is a Rajah, but his mother was a roaster of grain. The blockhead was insolent and wouldn't see me for hours while I sat in his hall. And then, when I was ushered in by his munshi, he was all over me, giving me a chair to sit on and asking me if I would have whey to drink or sweets to eat. And he said I shouldn't worry about the suit, for, with a friend like him at the court, I shouldn't fear at all. The case will be won.

'And he put me off till next time, took his fees and asked me to come and see him once again. And you know how it is. At the time I was quite persuaded that he was doing his best. . . . But . . . .'

'Do not send pigeons to carry your wheat,' said Lalu, 'and never be flattered by the attentions of a lawyer or a whore. You should let me go and see Balmukand . . . . Mother, give me another pot of whey if you have any left.'

" 'You need the donkey, but for your own purpose",' said Sharm Singh. 'You only want to go to town for your own fun.'

'Of course, and I am going to the Diwali fair,' snapped Lalu, edging away, without taking the cup of whey his mother was pouring.

'We will see about that,' said Sharm Singh.

'Vay, son, come and drink this. Don't mind your elder brother,' said Gujri.

'Is anything happening about the case then, Bapu?' asked Harnam Singh, to relieve the tension.

Lal Singh went and sat on the charpai by his father.

'He talked a lot, that vulture, and said our claim is certain if only we can put some more money into it. But I know the case is in the civil court, and that leper Harbans Singh knows the Sessions Judge. And I hear that Balmukand and Harbans have become reconciled, and I suspect the Vakil's intentions.'

'It is a terrible world,' consoled Gujri, 'in which only thieves and robbers seem to prosper. Look at Harbans

Singh in his white clothes, and his good-for-nothing sons. And that sahukar, who has had a mansion built. The dirty black Bikaneri had nothing to eat when he came here.'

" 'Honour and profit were never found in the same dish",' reflected Baba Nihalu. 'This sahukar is as nothing to those cloth merchants in the town. The way they pull you about, those bandits, "Ao, sardarji, ao, sardarji." And they get out the pieces which they haven't been able to sell, and the remainders, and announce such prices! And Guru knows the lies they tell . . . . Everywhere one goes in the town it is the same. At the courts, in the bazaar, in the wholesale market. The pleader thugs you, the Seth counts so quickly, you can't tell the figures, and the policia wants his palm greased before he lets the cart go past the customs . . . . God save us from them . . . .'

'The great Guru Nanak has said,' began Dayal Singh, ' "there are nights and days, lunar as well as solar, and seasons, there are elements of water, air and fire, and there are lower regions. In the midst of them God has established, as the abode of duty, this earth, with so many living beings of different forms and habits, of different names and kinds. They shall be judged according to their deeds by Him who is true and whose court is just. It is determined in that court who is raw and who is ripe. Nanak, we can know this only when we get there".'

He recited this in a high sing-song that give the words a deep significance. But though the audience was impressed by the rhetoric, and believed the content to be the ultimate truth of the matter, they didn't relate its message in any way to the matter, the concrete issue in hand.

'The unattainable is great,' said Lalu. 'The eagle would not pursue flies if flies were not so ignorant.'

'I don't know,' said Harnam Singh, 'what the Sarkar is up to. Last year we were told to grow as much as we could and that we would get a market for it, and a good profit. And now we have to sell the crop for less money than one-tenth of the interest we owe on the price of seed. . . .'

As he was saying this, Fazlu, the arain, who ran an oil-

mill and cultivated vegetables on a small plot of land in the neighbourhood of the near-by tank, came up, smoking a large hookah which he held from the basin in his hand, and said, 'I hear you have been to the town, Baba Nihalu.'

'Han, brother,' said Harnam Singh. 'Bapu has been to Manabad and I have been visiting Sherkot.'

'My cousin, Muhammad Raffi, the vakil, is standing for election to the Municipal Committee,' said Fazlu, to impress them with his big connections.

'Yes, brother,' said Harnam Singh. 'I bet he will be too busy even to see you if you should turn up at his bungla with a petition. Did you give him your vote? I hear they give ladus to people who go and vote for them.'

'Why didn't you give a vote then?' retorted Fazlu.

'I'll vote for anyone who will give me a fair market and protection against rent,' said Harnam Singh. 'But Muhammad Raffi, Barishter, won't increase the prices and lessen the taxes, brother, from what I hear of him. He only gives ladus to people during the days before the elections. Afterwards he expects people give him ludus.'

'What can you expect from a low, mean swine like him? He is like Harbans Singh, always licking the shoes of the Sarkar,' said Nihal Singh.

'How were vegetables selling?' asked Fazlu, to change the subject.

Neither the old man nor Harnam Singh answered because the way in which Fazlu talked big, and the fact that he was prospering on his patch of vegetables, while the Hindu and Sikh peasants were gradually deteriorating, although still too proud to condescend to cultivate vegetables for the market, annoyed them.

'I heard you were not very well, Baba Nihalu,' said Fazlu, sensing the awkwardness. 'I too feel a little rheumatism; the damp of the vegetables gets into my bones.'

'He gets tired going to town nowadays,' interposed Gujri.

'If you had been in Faizabad,' said Harnam Singh, turning to the old man, 'I would have taken you to see the Delhiwallah hakeem who treated my fever last year.'

'I am not ill,' said Nihalu. 'Only I am old, son, and have not the same strength as I once had. I suppose one must die some day or another.'

'May God never let such a thing come to pass!' exclaimed Gujri with concern.

'Perhaps the Mahant has a prescription he can give you, father,' said Sharm Singh. 'Ask him when you take him the gifts.'

' "There is no elixir of life," said Aflatun,' put in Lalu. 'And beware of a religious teacher who in greed is so gluttonous that he will suck the blood of the poorest.'

'There is dakdar from Amrika coming to visit the Padre Sahib with Miss Sahib and her mother,' said Dayal Singh.

'Hai, hai, they are beef-eaters, the eaters of their masters,' cried Gujri. 'We don't know what they put in their medicines.'

'But they are very God-fearing, mother,' said Dayal Singh. 'You must hear what they say. They say God is their father and they believe that when one dies the soul is saved by God's son.'

'Their message is good,' said Fazlu. 'It is just like the message of Hazrat Muhammad, who is admitted a brother prophet of Yessuh Messih. That is why we Muslims are much nearer the Christians than people of other religions.'

'It is the message that matters,' said Dayal Singh. And there was a tense silence.

'Did you see any preparations for the fair going on, Bapu?' asked Lalu Singh, who had been waiting for an appropriate moment to put the question.

'Onions, now. I wonder how they are selling,' interrupted Fazlu. 'I've got a nice lot ready for the market.'

'Tell me when you've quite done with the onions,' said Lalu, breaking in on Fazlu, 'and then I can ask Bapu about the fair.

'That is not the way to talk to your elders,' said Sharm Singh. 'And anyhow, we have no money for you to go to the fair.'

'Ohe, ohe, don't quarrel,' said Baba Nihalu irritably. 'Leave the young rascal alone. Of course, we have no money to spare. . . .'

'Vay, don't bully the boy,' said Gujri. 'Let him go to the fair if he likes. Now come, drink up this whey I have poured out for you.'

Lalu picked up the pot deliberately and drank. Then he got ready for work with a flourish. He belched as he rose, and stretched his arms with a feigned casualness.

'This education at the schools spoils our boys!' said Fazlu. 'They have no respect left for anyone.'

'I'll ask you to allow me to take the shovel on which you are sitting,' said Lalu, with mock humility. 'I've got to work.'

And with these words, he deprived Fazlu of his rather precarious stance on the shovel and broke up the company.

III

'I MUST go to the fair, whatever they say,' Lalu mumbled to himself. 'I must,' he repeated.

And he struck the earth hard with his hoe, as he retraced his steps over the ditch which had been blocked with sediment in its passage from the well to the farthest end of their ploughed land.

The thud, thud of his strokes mingled with the involuntary gasps of 'hum, hum' that issued from his throat at the end of each thrust, straining his breath. He had rolled back the sleeves of his cotton tunic, for he was absorbed in the effort to dig the ditch deeper, and he struck at the curve, unmindful alike of his shortening breath and of the bites of the gnats which flickered above a puddle of stagnant water.

Occasionally he rested his hoe for a moment and glanced across the fields to the pathway by which Suchi, the family buffalo, came back to the village from the grazing ground where she was taken by the cowherd with the other cattle.

Then he resumed work, but for a long moment his mind was a blank. He was only conscious of the mounds of moist earth yielding to his blade and breaking up into smaller mounds or crumbling away into particles where they were upturned. And he could only feel his burning face smart with the white heat of the lowering sun and the irritation of the sweat pouring across his skin.

He paused again for a while where he dug, legs athwart, waiting for a touch of the thin autumn breeze to smooth his face. He watched the coarse flanks of the earth parting into clear halves to admit the thin vein of water which had already begun to flow down from the reservoir.

A few more strokes from the place at the edge of the puddle where he had begun, and the ditch would be deep enough for the water to flow down evenly.

It was easy enough work though not so easy if you couldn't lift a shovel or a hoe or couldn't hit straight, he reflected, with the naive pride of the adolescent. It was not quite like bisecting a triangle on a piece of clean paper with the help of a rule and compass, nor like finding out the square root of five, as his eldest brother often reminded him in his bursts of rage. It undoubtedly required a peculiar knack, a skill that was the natural gift of the peasant. But what Sharm Singh forgot was that a kind of arithmetic was involved in it too. For his own capacity to do this job, or indeed any other job on the farm, had certainly not deteriorated through learning, as his brother and the elders of the village liked to maintain. They all liked to pretend that learning spoilt the boys and enfeebled them, and made them useless for work in the fields by giving them the airs of babus. That prejudice had hardened in their stubborn heads, and there was no way of making the bullocks understand that it could be otherwise. In a way, their attitude was understandable, he thought, trying to get to the depth of the problem with the earnestness which had always characterized his mental excursions. It was the fault of Harbans Singh's eldest son, who wanted to get into Sarkari service, and of the boys from other villages who wanted to become clerks. And to some extent the villagers were right, for not every

on of a city lalla could curve a straight line on the map of mother earth, however pretty the map he might draw in the classroom. But why should he be blamed for the shortcomings of the others?

He smiled again, happy in the confidence in his own capacity, and straightened his back for a moment to see if the ditch was deep enough.

It was still uneven in parts, and he walked back to the puddle to begin from the beginning.

As he began to dig deeper and hacked the earth again and again, till the water flowed through the shapely bed of the ditch, he felt an admiration for the energy that flowed with the laughter of the sun like a tingling warmth in his body.

He cast his eyes across the fields from side to side. What was the land like in the time of his forefathers who had founded the village? he wondered. It must have been the same. For the earth couldn't have changed much.

He sighed deeply and stared ahead with sad, remote eyes.

Ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing. The hard labour was good for the hands. "An old man for counsel, a young man for wear," they said, but for all that, they might give him a chance. He could increase the productivity of the land, and set the house in order and show them that he was not such a Patte Khan as they thought him.

He could see in his mind's eye the rich corn rustling beneath the blazing sun, and the slashing blade of his scythe reaping the crop, in April, and his mother making bundles of stalks to carry away. And what a happiness of peace there would be in the shade, after the toil in the burning sun, what a repose!

He would prove his worth to them. He would laugh at their endless woe, mock at them with joke, tease them with an unfore-seen trick or gesture, thrust the tongue of defiance to their wondering faces, and shock them out of the greybeard deadness into life. It could be done, and it should be done—

He flung back his head and stared around with bold defiance.

A crow cawed, unawed by his bold thoughts, and by the scare-crow on the patch where the seed had already been sprinkled for the autumn harvest. The noise seemed to mock his elation and, irritated by the ludicrous interruption, he stooped for a handful of crumbling earth and threw it at the bird. The black wings swooped up and flapped towards the fields where a late plougher was goading the bullocks to take the corner.

Lalu turned his eyes from the familiar sod of broken fields, and looked into the vague haze of further distances. Through the burning heat of the afternoon sun, over the burnt earth of the fallow pasture-land, a cloud of dust was rising. He shaded his eyes against the torrid glare and espied what he knew was the herd of the village cattle returning home. From the faint contours of their black, brown and white shapes, the faint echoes of their resonant bells and their faint mooing, the herd still seemed far away.

He wiped the perspiration that was pouring down his forehead, let the hoe drop from his hands and pulled the turban off his head. The end of it had come undone during his furious activity. He took the ivory comb which help the bun of his long hair intact in a mound on the top, cursed the long plaits, flung them before him, rolled them, bound them into a fresh knot, and then proceeded to retie the folds of his headcloth round his head.

'I will have this forest of tangled overgrowth cut if I get to the town for the fair,' he said with increasing impatience. 'As to this religion it is only ritual.' He twitched his lips in a pout of disgust. The katch, kara, kirpan, kesh and kanga might well have been necessary when Guru Govind was fighting Aurungzeb. Then it was said he enjoined his men to wear shorts because he couldn't get clothes, bangles and swords for symbols, and long hair because he couldn't get barbers to shave them, and combs to tidy their hair. Such provisions were dictated by necessity and common sense. But as everyone with a grain of intelligence said, what was the use of observing these conventions now that there was no further need for them? He had always felt impatient and embarrassed at having to wear

long hair. The other k's he didn't mind. They were unnecessary and superstitious, but they did not involve any active inconvenience.

But the way his mother had tied his hair into a pigtail when he was a child had made him look more like a girl than the other Sikh boys. And at school they had asked him to let down his hair and act the part of a girl in a play, and he had always been attacked by the other boys. That was why he had begun to be rough and unkempt. But when he didn't wash his hair it became lousy. And it was such an affliction in the hot weather, specially under the heavy load of a turban. But if only he could get it cut!

The ditch was deepening and the water of the puddle flowed through it, damping his right foot. He shook his foot and saw how large it was as compared to the feet of most people. That came of not wearing shoes. But you couldn't wear Indian shoes in the fields, as earth and pebbles got into them. The farmers of Amrika and Vilayat, it was said, wore long boots. He wondered what they were like, and what they were made of. But it was no use thinking of them, because so long as his eldest brother lived, and the old peasants, they would only mock at the idea. They wouldn't understand that the farmers of Vilayat wore one set of clothes for work and another set during their leisure hours. He would have to wait till he could make the land pay, and he could afford to have a few angrezi things for wearing on his holidays in the town. And cigarettes. And a revolver.

The extended chorus of the cows and buffaloes lowing across the footpath disturbed him. He looked up and saw that the cloud of dust, which had arisen from the hoofs of the herd far away beneath the hills, had now enveloped the adjacent fields. He must run and fetch Suchi.

He scanned the ditch. The water was flowing through now without any let or hindrance. There it came, creeping like a snake. The ditch might need sharpening again here and there, he thought. But that could be seen to tomorrow when the well was to start working.

He shouldered his hoe and plunged across the fields, wiping the sweat off his face with a lapel of his thick homespun shirt.

The sun had lost none of its fire in spite of the approaching autumn, and the earth felt warm under his feet. He quickened his pace and sniffed through the close afternoon for the balm of comfort. But the cells of his body exuded warmth. And the furious pace at which he was rushing to Suchi almost burst his veins.

As he leapt across the ditch that lay at the eastern end of the family fields, he saw that the herd was running ahead of Gopal, the cowboy. Part of it had already reached the edge of the tank. He made a short cut across Fazlu's vegetable patch, and was enveloped in the thick dust on the footpath immediately behind the cattle.

The struggling, stamping, hurrying forms of the cows and buffaloes, brown, black, grey, red and white, mingled their brute voices in a hysterical parade.

'Ohe Suchi? Ohe Suchi?' he shouted as he explored the cloud of dust for his buffalo.

'Ohe, Gapalu, where is she?'

' "Fat blinds your eyes",' Gopal called back. 'She is near you. Catch her. I must attend to the landlord's cows who are scattering. But I'll meet you at Kabadi when I have finished milking.'

Lalu still could not see Suchi. He hoped she had not run into the tank, as it was always difficult to get her out if she had.

There she was, doing the wrong thing, pushing past a lean cow and making for the tank.

'Daughter of a donkey, may your husband die!' he cried, and ran across the little mounds and hillocks that raised the kacha road from the tank.

She had dipped her forehoofs into the water when he caught hold of her by the tail. But apparently she was only going to drink.

'All right, my child,' he said as she raised her muzzle, dripping with the water from the tank, for him to caress. And he stroked her warm back as he stood by her to let

her drink her fill.

He was at ease now, and contemplated the stagnant scumcovered tank, filled with aquatic plants, with a vacant stare.

Some of the women of the village were washing clothes as they couched on the steps, a short distance away from a professional washer-woman who hit the clothes on a slab of stone. And two girls were just emerging after a dip, their dhotis sticking to their bodies. The boy's glance sharpened in spite of himself, and he traced the contours with the uprush of a warmth that melted in a furtive glance, half afraid that he might be seen staring at the women and half happy to touch the rim of his tumultuous desires. One of the girls united her wet dhoti and stood naked for the briefest moment before wrapping a dry length of cloth around herself. He turned his eyes away, embarrassed, and stroked Suchi. The buffalo shivered with satisfaction. But Lalu was angry with himself for having been embarrassed.

For a moment he stood, torn between the fascination of looking and the necessity of walking away. The mosquitoes whined on the green grease of the tank in the humid air and came towards Suchi, while a frog showed its head to the rainbow gleam of her eyes. She reared away.

'Let us go then,' Lalu said to her. 'Let us go home.'

Suchi turned her nose towards him, then lowed a soft assent, and headed quickly homewards.

Lalu lifted his feet and tried to take a short cut to catch her up. But the sodden mud, kneaded into a dough by the cattle's hoofs, stuck to his toes. He mounted the even surface of the track and ran across the manure which Fazlu had heaped by his vegetable plot.

The particles of dust raised by the herd, which was just entering the village, flew, like grains of gold, and the flat roofs of the village houses emerged in their contrast of mud and old and new brick above the sparse green mottled by pools of sunlight in the hushed afternoon air.

'I must see Gughi and Churangi after I have seen Suchi home,' Lalu said to himself. 'I must ask them about the fair.'

IV

THE SUN was lowering over the shadows of the mud walls as Lalu neared home, and there was a slight chilly breeze blowing through the lanes.

Suchi rushed clumsily in through the hall door, mooing, mhen, mhen, like a child announcing its arrival home.

'Wait, oh wait, be patient,' Lalu called as he followed her into the cattle shed. At first his eyes were blinded by the darkness in the small room. Then he grew accustomed to the gloom as he groped for the rope on the peg in a corner beyond the hulking grey forms of the bullocks, Thiba and Rondu, who stood munching at the fodder in the manger, and whisking their tails to keep the flies from alighting on their dung-bespattered hind legs.

Sharm Singh came in, leading the black calf, Vachi which struggled to reach its mother's teats as it lowed piteously.

'Tie this lover of its mother up, away from Suchi, somewhere,' he said. 'It's nearly pulled my arm out.'

And he began to chop up the green fodder that Dayal Singh and Lalu had gathered during the day, crouching by the light of the door against a wooden pillar. He was grim as usual and silent.

Lalu could hear the strokes of the chopper falling upon the stalks with a deliberate, unceasing regularity, and the faint echo of his brother's breath, hard and metallic. And he had a sense of oppression, of being bullied, both by his brother's silent will and by the sharp, reverberating strokes which mingled with Sharm Singh's breath. He tied up the restless calf and, patting Thiba and Rondu, he hastily made for the door.

'I think Bapu has left some things he bought for the Mahant which Mother wants you to take to the shrine,' said Sharm Singh sullenly, without looking up from his work.

Lalu turned and left the shed, without offering an answer. As he walked across the courtyard, past his sister-in-law who sat crocheting in the warmth of the last slant-

ing rays of the sun, past the granary and the straw which stood stacked in a corner of the courtyard opposite the hall, towards the kitchen where his mother was at the spinning-wheel, he felt the fear which the presence of his eldest brother always awakened.

'Is that a handkerchief for me that you are knitting, Kesaro?' he teased his sister-in-law. For he was in sympathy with the warm, humorous forwardness of her manner and with her feminine charm.

'No, a cover for your bridal bed,' she teased him, knowing that he did not like any talk about his betrothal.

'Come, my son, I will warm your milk, or do you want some tea instead?' Gujri asked, as she dipped a wooden ladle into the black-bottomed earthen pan in which the dal for the evening meal was already cooking.

'I don't want any milk,' the boy said. 'Where are the things Bapu has left behind, which Sharm Singh wants me to go and deliver?'

'What's the matter, my son?' his mother asked. 'Has he been going on at you again? I won't have him saying anything to my son.'

'No, mother, it's nothing to do with him,' lied Lalu.

'All right, son, then you come and drink up your milk,' Gujri coaxed, twisting her lips affectionately. 'Dayalu has gone to help with the preparations for the celebration of Guru Govind Singh's birthday at the Dharamsalla. So you go and take the parcel to the monastery.'

'Lalu, child, it is only his way,' said Kesari, apologizing for her husband. 'He is always quarrelling with me and beats me if I say a word. You shouldn't mind.'

'Does he beat my poor little sister Kesaro, then?' Lalu said, pouting his lips, and he came fussing up to his sister-in-law and patted her on the head. 'Poor little Kesaro . . . . . Shall I kill him and marry you instead?' he teased.

Kesari laughed and giggled and admonished. 'Go, go, you bad one. You said just now you did't want to ma rry at all."

'So I did,' Lalu said, and with the mock-serious e xpres-

sion of a saint he went and sat down on a hemp stool outside the kitchen. Then, with a sigh, he began to wash his hands and feet. Sharm Singh did fling his weight about somehow, and however much you tried to understand, it hurt.

Gujri was pressing some grains of lentils in her fingers to see if they were soft. Just a slight hardness, she thought, with a shake of her head. But she must get ready to garnish them with onions which she was frying in butter, since she had two more dishes to cook yet, and the chapatis to bake.

'Ni Kesaro,' she called her daughter-in-law abruptly. 'Go in and get me a handful of ghee from the tin, and give your brother-in-law his soap and towel. You can leave that wonderful design till tomorrow now. You have been at it all day.'

Lalu smiled ruefully at the hard note that had crept into his mother's voice. She was trying to show her sympathy with his resentment against Sharm Singh by bullying his wife. Poor little Kesaro!

'Give me my milk, mother,' he said. 'I have washed. I don't want the soap. And I will get you the butter.' And, smiling, at his sister-in-law, he repeated the phrase which Gujri was wont to hurl at her, 'Kesaro's dainty, henna-dyed fingers will get dirty.'

'Oh, I suppose I had better get it myself,' said Gujri, shamed against her will at her own pettiness as she caught the light mockery in her son's words.

But hadn't she said : 'You are not content with the old man. You want four husbands and you hang on to your sons. Give me my husband and you can keep the rest!' What words she had used! None of my daughters could have been so immodest. All for show and sitting round, decked in fineries and the most expensive jewellery. No sense, no decency. Never realizing that the grave and the wise keep their ornaments hidden and only display them at a festival or a marriage.

And Gujri lifted herself rather peevishly from the cramped position in which she crouched. But as she

straightened her limbs, the hardness which had possessed her seemed to relax and she smiled.

Lalu darted into the living-room to change his shirt and tehmet, feeling exactly as he had felt when he had followed his mother around the home as a child.

After he had changed and contemplated himself as usual in a steel-framed looking-glass which he had brought from Sherkot, and which was one of the few modern objects in the old world of the barn, he emerged, hastily sipped the milk which his mother had put in an open bronze cup, took the parcel intended for the Mahant and, without attending to a word of the instructions his mother gave him, put his feet into his rustic well-oiled shoes and rushed out.

V

THE SMOKE of cow-dung cakes from the hearth-fires of peasant homes now choked the alleyways, and groups of little boys were playing bat and ball and splashing in the dirty slime of the congested drains.

Lalu hurried through the parts where the stink was most offensive, the loose end of his turban lifted to his nose and the folds of his tehmet in his hand. But the sickening smell of stale lentils, wet crumbs, torn rags, mud refuse and garbage which choked the drain still lingered. For the wind seemed to be blowing towards the bazaar way, and filled the nostrils with a stench that was enough to make the shop of Mota Singh, the perfumer and sherbet vendor, smell like a sewage farm.

Occasionally he found himself peeping through the open doors of people's houses for the sight of a skirt, but the heaps of mud and cow-dung and urine on the uneven floors of the courtyards disgusted him.

He recalled how Gurmukh Singh, an old peasant friend of his father, who had lived in a house by the Mosque, had died because some bugs had clung to his nostrils and could not be pulled out. And he feared that he also might pick

up some such flea, for there were so many germs about. Or if the plague came!

The last time this epidemic had caught the village, it had taken his younger brother and two uncles, and his mother had sent him to live with his sister Aqi at Lahore.

If only a fire could come and burn these wretched hovels to the ground! He would like to see the village re-built with brick, as the houses of the mechanics near the Power House were being built.

But there was Kalu licking the deep iron pan of Badri, the confectioner!

'Ohe, dur, dur, dog!' he shouted to scare the dog away. And then he beckoned to him, calling 'Tohe, tohe'. But Kalu kept his distance, nonchalantly licking his tongue.

'There is no talk, son,' said Badri, from where he sat in his greasy clothes, rubbing his utensils in the ashes, 'let him have it, it's only the leavings.'

'Uncle, he puts his mouth to dung and dirt and . . .' he began, but it was, useless to continue. ' "The blindest is he who will not see",' he muttered under his breath, and went on his way.

As he approached the shop of Chaman Lal, the sahukar, he knew he would not have the courage to call for Churanji. So he decided to walk slowly by and make a sign to the boy to follow if he could catch his eye.

There was Chamuna, the flea, as the sahukar was generally misnamed, leaning on the cow-tailed cushion, and there was Churanji, sitting silently at his feet. If only there had been some customers round the moneylender, he could have called Churanji. But as it was . . . He felt his heart beating. He did not want to be abused by Chaman Lal!

So he flashed by quickly without looking to the left or the right and did not care whether Churanji saw him or not.

He felt easier when he was out of sight of the money-lender's shop. It was so unfair for the little fat fool of a Churanji to be the son of an affluent sahukar, he thought. He had more pocket money, of course, but what a life!

And Lalu could not restrain a smile as he reflected on

the misfortunes of his fat little friend. It was a shame to tease him as they did! But his thoughts were diverted as he caught sight of a row of luckless children in the dust outside the school, holding their ears before Master Hukam Chand. It was long after closing time. 'Oh God, what an affliction of the poor! . . .

The old swine with his long face and goatbeard! Not dead yet! And his heart swelled again with the bitterness of an ancient grudge. How relieved he had felt when he had passed the fifth form and gone away to the middle school at Sherkot. For Hukam Chand had a vendetta against Lalu because Nihalu had refused to give him a sack of wheat every harvest, and because Lalu had refused to bear the master's grain to the flour-mill at Sherkot to have it ground. In those days life had begun every morning with five stripes of the cane on his palms.

Now, of course, Hukam Chand always tried to be nice. Lalu wondered if it was because he had done well in the Middle School. Though it was only outwardly that Hukam Chand smiled, for it was he who had said to Lalu's father : 'Let a boy go seven miles away from the village to town, he will acquire the sins of a gentleman, blowing his nose and spitting into handkerchiefs instead of on the earth, and flaunting the temperament of the son of a Sahib.'

Ignorant, stupid monster, he vituperated, and he rushed away as if the tyrant's power was descending once again on his head.

Then, as his panic subsided, he tried to laugh away his fears.

'Why did I come this way at all?' he reproached himself. For he felt like a coward with many eyes who fears the wolves and wishes he had avoided the forest. But there was still a stretch of the bazaar before him, which was more crowded than usual at this time, as several of the peasants were out buying groceries and sitting round in groups exhanging gossip before they repaired to the various houses of God for prayers.

Then he suddenly espied Father Annandale, the full-bearded, long-robed missionary Sahib, Head Master of the

Middle School of Sherkot. He was driving away probably from the outcasts' homes where he went to visit the sweepers and leather workers whom he had converted to Christianity. The padre might be looking for his brother, Dayal Singh, Lalu thought, and was sure to detain him. It was no good getting involved in any more errands.

He took a sharp turn into the weavers' lane to call Ghulam.

'The eater of his masters, he is not at home! Go away you illegally begotten! You think of nothing else but play all day!' came the abuse of Ghulam's mother.

Lalu branched off through the crevices of a broken house into the ploughed fields beyond which, to the north-west of his father's land, on a hillock, in the diminishing light, he discerned the shrine of Mahant Nandgir, the monastery.

He stared at the huge cemented walls of the square house, buttressed like a fort. As a child he had been dreadfully afraid to go near because of all the legends and stories he had heard about it. Since the disappearance into the air of the first Mahant Nandgir, it was said, his spirit lived in the golden temple in the cave in which he had worshipped, and it had entered and inspired each of his successors in turn. This myth had always summoned a ghastly apparition of the first Mahant before Lalu's eyes when he was young. But though he was brave enough to face the ghost now, he still could not go into the cave. For it was reached by crawling through a rat-infested, bat-infested passage, hardly wide enough to admit one person at a time. It was supposed that the first Mahant willed his body into seven different parts in the miniature temple in the cave and prayed for days on end, and crawled two hundred miles on his hands and feet to Hardwar, on the banks of the Ganges, through a tunnel which was now closed by order of the Sarkar.

It was eerie, too, to sit among the round-shaped mounds of earth, in the quadrangle of the monastery itself, for the tombs were surrounded by an almost tangible air of desolation and death.

The late afternoon sun was retreating before the thin mist that rose from the fallow fields around the hillock. An uncanny dread seeped into Lal Singh's bones like the dusk which was creeping into the valleys. He looked about him and tried to shake off the feeling. A couple of horses grazed on the thin grass by a shallow on his right, snorting every now and then to disperse the frogs and beetles that croaked near their mouths. A peasant called to the birds which came flying in droves to their nests. Ahead of him he could espy the faint outline of a figure, silhouetted small and grey against the great left flank of the monastery wall.

He peered at the form before him for a moment. It was Sitalgar, the good, who had gone bald carrying water from the village well to the shrine for the use of the Mahant and visitors to the monastery.

'Wait, let me carry the pitcher for you, Baba Sitalgar,' Lalu called, as he raced up to the shrivelled old man who was naked except for a wisp of cloth round his loins.

'No, son,' the old man whispered between two puffs of tried breath, moving a finger of his right hand as if to cast a benediction and to excuse himself.

The boy did not insist, as he knew the old man never let anyone relieve him of this job. The ascetic had attached himself to the shrine some thirty years ago, when, as it was said, a moneylender in the Jammu hills had defrauded him of his worldly goods and attached his land. And he was the truest saint of the spirit in those parts. For although he seemed as simple as an idiot, the dog-like devotion, the tireless loyalty, the complete abnegation of himself in the service of others that he practised, indicated a depth of character that had never been gauged. 'Sat bachan' and 'at your service' were the only accents that ever fell from his lips, except that, at times, when he sat down to listen to the woes of the peasants who came from the outlying parts of the country, he said a sentence or two, repeating like a parrot the formula he had heard, 'God is one. God is one. And all else is illusion.' After this, he invariably added, 'But, of course, you must ask Mahantji what is right and what is wrong, for I am not

worthy of knowing the secret and of offering advice to anyone.'

And the peasants mostly laughed at him, especially as the Mahant made a butt of the old man every time the conversation in the shrine became too serious.

Lalu took a deep breath to steady himself after his race up the hill. He felt a queer humility to find himself walking by the old man without being able to relive him of his burden.

'You must be tired, baba, carrying pitchers all day,' he ventured.

Sitalgar did not answer.

Lalu searched the old man's face for the sign of a protest or a prayer. But there was nothing there. Only the heavily shaded, half-closed eyes looked down across the ugly, long nose, and the blue lips, while his grisly black-white beard pointed down to the ground on which he trod with small, effortless steps. Then his mouth opened and, with a great strain, he whispered, as if he were panting for every breath :

' "If there be no heart, son, let there at least be feet." '

Lal Singh stared at the old man again with pity and embarrased affection. Only the shapeless features of Sitalgar's rugged face were before him, the bald, dark brow marked by a darker patch above the wrinkled lines.

For some moments he walked along by the old man. Then, impelled by a genuine wish to engage him in talk and yet not knowing what to say, he remarked :

'Baba, come, I will take you to the fair.'

He spoke without thinking, but after he had delivered the words he felt that he would really like to take the old man to the town, because he knew the ascetic had never been away for a day for twenty years.

'Yes, son. I would like to go with you,' breathed Sitalgar, 'but who will fetch water for the pilgrims to the shrine?'

'What does he think and feel?' Lal Singh wondered. Would he really come? How would he react to all the crowded world of the city if he came?

As they reached the huge portals of the fort-like man-

sions which crowned the promontory, Sitalgar waved his hand as he had done before. Then he halted by a niche built into the projection of the wall by the gateway, put down the pitcher from his head on to the marble slab that was used for a seat, untied the strip of cloth which we wore, brought out a rupee and offered it to Lal Singh as if it were a pebble. The boy accepted it in his palm before he realized what had happened. Then he saw what it was and opened his lips to protest. But Sitalgar waved his hand and said : 'You spend it at the fair for me, son.'

'But Baba Sitalgar,' Lalu said, and while he looked, open-eyed, open-mouthed, the old man picked up the pitcher, lowering his head to the level of the slab and entered the hall on his way to the kitchen.

Lalu followed him through the large dark hall into the vast courtyard where, on a terrace, raised from the earth by three steps in front of his living-rooms, resting on a cowtailed cushion, sat the Mahant in orange robes, smoking from a long-necked chilm, as he chatted between coughing puffs with three or four peasant about him. The boy discarded his shoes at the foot of the steps and, according to the familiar custom, went up to the Mahant, knelt before him, touched his feet with the right hand, and laid the things he had brought before him.

'Come, ohe, Lal Singha, friend,' blessed the holy man in a heavy, hilarious voice, looking the while at the bundle of things, 'you haven't been here for days. What has kept you? You have become a stranger.'

Lal Singh winced and bent his head, embarrassed at the familiarity of the Mahant's address. He was conscious that the Mahant's attempts at bonhomie sought to elicit the good will of the younger and more critical members of village society. For the Mahant wanted to guard against aspersions on his character, a character which, in spite of the disguise of his yellow robes, was transparent to those who knew of his loves and who had seen his women disciples sublimate the passion of his flesh by the constant massages of his body that the prettier of them were chosen to give when they came on anniversaries and fairs.

'Come, come and sit near me,' said the Mahant. 'Why do you sit so far away? You need not tell me any of your secrets, but come here. I here your father has been arranging your betrothal.'

'No, it was about Dayal Singh's marriage that Bapu must have been talking,' said Lalu, flushing red and still standing away, with bent head.

'Come, son. You have brought the things which I purchased for the Mahantji then, have you? Come,' said Nihal Singh, issuing from the open-air kitchen which stood by the graves of the holy men, under the shadow of the left wall of the shrine, with a wooden pestle and a stone mortar in his hand. 'Come, you are just in time for some sardai.' And then he sat down on the terrace with the mortar held between his crossed legs.

With sudden alacrity, he stirred the contents with the wooden pestle, and burst out singing in a key of high-pitched exalta :

' "Come, son, come, brother, come, everyone,
Let us grind the hemp.
Let us grind the drink of the gods
And drink it. . . . . ." '

Lalu sat down, overcome with shame at his father's abandon. He guessed that the old man had already drunk a portion of hemp before setting out to grind a fresh mixture.

'Shabash, Baba, shabash!' cried Harnam Singh, who sat on the right of the Mahant. The three other peasants who were presumably from some distant village, as their faces were unfamiliar to Lal Singh, encouraged mildly, 'Wah, wah, baba! Wah, wah!' while the Mahant was going to add a phrase of enthusiasm when the smoke of the drug choked the words in his throat in the paroxysms of an unending cough, till he spat out a weight of phlegm across the terrace in front of him.

' "Let us grind the hemp,
Let us grind. . . ." '

Nihal sang again as he ground the ingredients with a violence which seemed to gather up all the dormant invi-

sible resources of energy in him. He seemed to revolve like a top jumping from the earth, settling on his seat, then jumping up again.

'Let us grind the hemp,
Let us grind the hemp . . .'

Lalu ached with apprehension at the strain to which his father was putting himself, though he felt his blood stir with affection for the wonderful naturalness with which the old man always burst out. His fear increased as Nihal Singh rose on the crest of his passion and nearly hit the pestle against his knees and splashed the liquid about. He seemed to be yielding completely to the hysteria to which all drinkers and grinders of hemp are subject. And yet there seemed no way of stopping him, short of asking to relieve him. But the old man would consider that impertinent. He never wanted to acknowledge his failing strength. Perhaps Harnam Singh or one of the older peasants would ask him.

The boy waited tensely, but the congregation had become rapt in the rhythm of the old man's activity. The peasants closed and opened their eyes, smacked their lips and revolved their heads as if they too were in a state of intoxication.

Lalu was going to open his mouth. But just then the old man brought the pestle to a standstill, lowered the key of his dithyramb, and, lifting his right hand in the manner of a religious preacher, recited :

'Water is the father, great earth the mother, and the air inspires our clay.
Day and night are the nurses, male and female in whose lap the whole world is playing.
Our deeds, good and bad, shall be read out in the presence of the Supreme Judge.
According to their own actions, some shall get a place just near Him, while others shall be thrown far away.
Those who kept the Name always in their hearts, toil shall be over.
And their faces shall reflect glory, Nanak in their company, many others, too, shall be saved.'

'Sat bachan, sat bachan!' whispered the peasants, who were now lifted to an extraordinary pitch of devoutness, while Harnam Singh raised the highest cry of Sikh devotion, 'Jo bole so, Nihal, Sat Sri Akal!' The Mahant had closed his eyes. Lalu wondered whether he sought to concentrate on the significance of the sacred verses or merely to take his mind off from religion to the taste of the charas he was smoking.

'It these words of the Guru Sahib be true, then I shall be saved, shall I not, Mahantji?' continued Nihal Singh, suddenly changing his ecstatic attitude to one of abject humility.

The Mahant nodded his head casually, as if he were far away.

'I fought for the Khalsa,' Nihal Singh burst with drunken boastfulness. 'I fought, brothers, I fought for the cause of the Panth. I had sinned before that, and I have sinned since, but in that battle, brothers, I fought with the sword in my hand, as all of us fought. And not only did I fight, but I ground the spices for the kitchens even as I am grinding this liquid, in service. We joined hands to each other, and said, "Sat bachan!" and we fought the enemies of the Panth, the ferungis as well as the traitors. We were betrayed as the ferungis had guns, whose voice could be heard over hundreds of miles. But we fought to the last. Shall I not be saved, then? Shall I not be saved with those other brave men who died in battle? Shall I be condemned, brothers, just because I lived on when they lie dead? I am not a coward, I tell you, brothers, I am not. I am not a coward. I didn't want to escape, believe me brothers. I flung myself in the face of death!'

And here he stopped, fearing that by talking of cowardice he had put the idea of his possible baseness into the heads of the asssembly.

Then, since no one spoke a word either of praise or blame, he said, with tears in his eyes, I tell you, brothers, that is the truth, by the oath of the Wah Guru. I fought and I wasn't a coward. Now I am afraid, now I am afraid, now I am a coward, because the time has come for me

to die. I was afraid this morning as I was walking back from the station. I could see it, I could see it coming. I could see it creeping behind my back, like a soft-footed thief. And I can't shed the fear of that thief, I can't fling it off my spine . . . I . . .'

The flood of his words was choking him and tears rolled down his cheeks. He bent his head and, wiping his face with his sleeve, put his hands to his chest and coughed. Then he made an effort to go on :

'Life, life makes cowards of us in bed! Oh that I had died at war, fighting against the ferungis, rather than live to be deprived of my land by that dog Harbans Singh . . .'

And he felt his voice reaching up and grasping at the dried-up cords of his throat.

'There is no talk of that, Nihalu,' Mahant Nandgir intervened. He could not tolerate an attack on his friend. 'The peasants who have donated land to the monastery abuse us, the saints, even as you fulminate against the landlord. There is no talk of that. God has given a place to everyone in this world. You know well that a serf has not the dignity or a farmer like you. Keep your prestige, therefore, but do not set yourself in the same place as other folk. For that would be a sin. This is the true religion, that you should not envy your superiors, for if you did so, there would be no order in the world. And you can defile your own house with abuse of your enemy, but fear to spit in the house the saints.' And he laughed nervously after administering the rebuke.

'I have fought for truth,' protested Nihalu. 'I have fought for truth, Mahantji, and God will hear me.'

'Acha, I agree,' said the Mahant, 'but then you cannot want to set yourself above us, the saints, if you want to be heard by God. And you have only to come to us with your troubles and you will be heard by God. The humbler you are, the more readily we can intercede with God on your behalf.'

'There must be justice in the world,' burst Nihalu, fiercely obstinate. 'And if I don't get the suit about my land settled in the lower court, I shall take it to the high

court, and if it is not settled there, I shall appeal to the highest court of God. I shall never give in. For why should I abandon what is mine? And to him, the traitor, who has thieved land without end.'

'Justice, Baba, is only for him who has the power to win it on his side,' said Harnam Singh.

'Except that justice is not always God's grace,' said the Mahant.

'But my God will hear, my God will hear . . .' shouted Nihalu, and he was growing hysterical, when Lalu said : 'Come, Bapu, let me grind the sardai. You are getting tired.' He admired his father's passion but also despised it as it served Nandgir.

He got up to relieve his father, and Nihal Singh, still coughing, went to sit by the Mahant and began pressing his legs as if to make penance for the sins of commission and omission.

'I know,' said a peasant on the left of the Mahant, 'what it is to feel such fear. Don't they say that there is no fear more horrible than the fear of a thief or a snake? And as the reptile bit my son in the fields, I happened to be cutting the grass and saw it creep by my side. Imagine, imagine the terror I felt.

'How far behind did you leave the palki?' asked Harnam Singh. 'I hope the boy's breath lasts out till Chandi can come, or the Mahantji can touch him.'

'Baba Nihalu,' said the Mahant, with a smile as he patted the old man with his right hand, 'you are getting old. You cannot grind the drink any more. We must initiate Lalu into the mysteries of this nectar, because when Dayal Singh isn't here, the boy can come and serve the sadhus.'

'Sat bachan, Maharaj, sat bachan,' said Nihalu, joining his hands, 'but two hemp addicts in a family seems enough, don't you think?'

The Mahant laid aside the chilm from which he was smoking, lifted his hand and, evading the question, continued in a casual voice, 'You shouldn't be afraid. Life has to end, and you will find a just reward for the service that

you have rendered to the saints. For nothing else counts, neither the glory of battle, nor the telling of breads, so much as service of saints.'

'Do open the bundle, Mahantji, and see if the silk I have brought you is to your liking. The harvests were not fetching good prices and I . . . .'

The Mahant, who had forgotten all about the bundle while he smoked the chilm, now began to undo the parcel with clumsy, eager fingers.

Lalu's blood boiled both with the heat involved in grinding the hemp and with the sense of having been trapped. He had only intended to come and deliver the bundle, stay a minute, for the sake of appearances, and go away to find his friends in the fields. And since he had neither much knowledge of, nor much interest in religion, he sensed below the Mahant's emphasis on 'the service of saints', a confirmation of his prejudice about this holy man's spirituality. It was no wonder, he felt, that the synonym for priest most often in the mouths of the people was 'that dog'. And he could see a leer in the Mahant's glance and a shiftiness in his manner which was characteristic of most of them.

'How beautiful it is!' the Mahant said, handling the silk, but he added as an aside, with a little more emphasis as if to impress on the other peasants that though he would accept this present, he preferred a dearer variety, 'this is Japani silk.'

Lalu felt a violent revulsion against Nandgir now. That the wretch should make it a point to remind the old man about the cheapness of the cloth. And his father had said that the harvests were not fetching much. Why couldn't the family learn better than to waste money on gifts for these charlatans? Why? The man hadn't done anything for them for years, but came in at the end of every harvest for his share of the grain and the gift of clothes! The lecher! He ate sumptuous food, dressed in yellow silks, smoked charas and drank hemp, and, if reports were true, whored and fornicated. And he was kept as a holy man, the Guru of the community!

The boy's heart swelled with fury. And he frothed in his mouth and gritted the poison of bitterness beneath his teeth even as he revolved the pestle in the mortar with an increased strength and at a furious tempo.

'Mai kutian wali! Mother of dogs!' A hoarse chorus of children's voices could be heard outside the hall of the monastery, and the crash and bang of stones striking the walls.

'Vay may you die! Vay, may nothing remain of you! Vay, may your mothers die that you torture me so!' came the shrill, familiar cries of Chandi, the demented old witch woman. She lived in a straw hut by the cremation-ground of the village in the ravine with a couple of stray dogs in the summer, and in the caravanserai in the winter.

'Mai kutian wali, mai kutian wali!" The boys' teasing shout went on.

'Vay, may the vessels of your lives be drowned! Vay, may nothing remain of you! Vay, have you not mothers and sisters, that you irritate me?' Chandi's shrill voice was becoming shriller as she stood in the gateway beyond the hall, frail like the withered branch of a tree, swaying hysterically and waving her hands in defiance at her tormenters, while she gathered her tattered dhoti around her waist and shook her shock of streaming, scattered hair.

'Mai kutian wali . . . .'

'Vay, eaters of your masters!' Chandi's voice now rose to a crescendo. She ran round to chase her pursuers, and the pebbles ceased to fall as the boys ran off shrieking.

'Ohe, go, ohe, someone,' said the Mahant casually. 'Go and fetch her in from those swine.'

'There is the palanquin, there is our boy,' the peasants chorused.

A tense silence prevailed during which the father of the lad, who had been brought, rushed to see if there was still life in the boy's body.

Harnam Singh was going to run out to fetch Chandi, but he had hardly risen before she rushed in, fuming and frothing, her eyes glinting like burning coals, her nostrils

dilating wide like a breathless mare.

'They torture me and torment me, these eaters of their masters, Mahantji,' she said. 'Look, they have bruised my legs and arms. Why are they after my life? Why can't they tease their mothers, their sisters! May they die!'

'There is no talk! There is no talk!' consoled the Mahant. 'They are rogues! You should keep quiet and not take any notice of what they say. Now where is Hafiz, the drummer? You wait and rest till he comes.'

Chandi sat wearily for the moment, and closed her eyes as if she were going to sleep.

'He is in the hall, I think,' said Harnam Singh, and he shouted, 'Ohe, Hafizia, come in, ohe, come in.'

Hafiz, the bearded old hereditary musician, came, bearing his drum. He still led concert-parties to peasants' homes on the occasion of marriages and births, and, as a menial, he had waited to be called to Mahant's sacred presence. He raised his hand to his head, saying, 'Salaam, Mahantji, father-mother.'

Lalu had heard that Chandi, the witch woman, was supposed to be possessed by the spirit of the king of snakes. She could cure anyone who had been bitten, with the help and blessing of the Mahant.

He had now finished grinding the liquid, and was draining the mixture into cups for the company to drink. But just then Hafiz struck up the drum and Chandi, who had sat still and intent, brooding heavily, began to shiver like someone possessed of a fever.

That was how she began to go into her trance, and though he had often seen her do it in his childhood, he left the pestle and mortar and watched, fascinated.

Even as he turned, the shivering gave place to a hissing, hard-breathing, shaking movement, at a faster tempo. And, as he contemplated the faces of the congregation in the eerie tenseness of the monastery courtyard, and saw the bitten body lie as dead in the stillness, the hissing, hard-breathing, shaking movement became the wriggling of a snake when it gives chase. The music of the drum had mounted to a rhythm which seemed to seep into Lalu's

blood, and he felt embarrassed even as he lent himself to it.

But Chandi was almost going mad as, with a majestic sweep of her loose black hair, streaked with white, a smile on her lips that lit the haggard, sunken-cheeked ugliness of her face into an ecstasy, she began to revolve her head while she blew forth sharp whiffs of breath, like a cobra when it dances. Round and round the head went, round and round, till, while Lalu felt tickled to laugh, the blood on Chandi's face seemed to merge into an illusory circle of fire. And while she moved her head thus furiously she began to crawl on all fours, still revolving her head, still blowing and puffing short gasps of breath, spitting the profuse froth that was gathering on the corners of her mouth, and describing circles round the palanquin.

From shivering she passed to shaking, from shaking to wriggling and crawling in circles. Then she began to jump and caper, with short steps more like a monkey than a snake, and her head revolved with the violence of a whirlwind as she blew her breath in spurts of anger, and cast her spittle about the air as if she were spreading her venom against the world with a malevolent wrath. Her face struck the earth sometimes, and she seemed to lose control of her head completely, so that it struck against the edge of the palanquin and bled. But on and on she went, in a ceaseless, dangerous movement, the curves of a snake dance that was as fascinating in its mixture of human and reptile gestures as it was frighteningly terrible to behold. And time and space seemed to swirl in this mad dance to which the continuous thunder of the drum added a mighty abandon. Life seemed to lose its meaning and its reality on the shimmering waves of the steady stares that waited, half full of doubt, half full of hope, for the miracle to be performed.

The tension grew to a strange and uncanny height as Chandi, wrapt in the ecstasy of her movement, tired and violent, lifted by the swirling tides of her furious activity, became completely involved in her own warmth and seemed to forget the purpose for which she had summoned the spirit of the king of the snakes. She drifted almost to the

edge of the kitchen, which, to her as an outcast from society, was forbidden territory.

But then she changed her direction suddenly as if, even in her trance, she remembered her birth. And she danced to the foot of a banyan tree which stood overshadowing the courtyard in a corner, and blew into the holes at its roots to propitiate the snake gods who were supposed to live there. Then, absorbed in the shaking splendour of her dance, she whirled across to the palanquin where the bitten body of the peasant boy lay. And she began to blow at the various parts of it, drifting away after a brief spell as if to intensify her movement. And the father of the boy whispered : 'Wah Guru. Hey, Wah Guru!' as if each movement of suspence, while his son still lay dormant, was like the load of centuries on his tight-stretched heart.

At this stage, the Mahant got up and, going towards Chandi, made as if to breathe a divine secret into the snake spirit's ear. And the musician shouted short little cries of encouragement as he hastened the tempo of his thumps on the drum.

Chandi followed the Mahant, spitting and snarling as a snake to its charmer, and moved towards the body. She circled round, while the holy man explored the pale olive skin of the boy for the spot where it had been bitten. But he couldn't find it.

The father of the boy, unable to bear the suspense any longer, rose eagerly and came forward and laid his fingers on his son's left ankle.

Upon this the Mahant led the snake spirit up to the ankle of the boy and breathed again into Chandi's ears.

The possessed woman sat, her head revolving, sweeping the dust with her hair, with a playful movement which rapidly assumed the utmost ferocity. Then, falling upon the boy's ankle, she blew upon the wound again and again, spitting and spattering, and rubbed the sweep of her hair on it.

The Mahant bent down when she had repeated this for several seconds, and breathed something else into her ear.

Then he motioned to the palanquin bearers to take the body and lay it on the terrace and signed to the musician to stop beating the drum.

Chandi's head revolved frantically for a while, as it had done when she had blown at the ankle. Then, as if the fuel to the fire of her movement was exhausted now that the music had stopped, she slackened. Her shaking became a wriggle, and then her wriggle relaxed into a quivering and the quivering into a shiver, till at the end she sat still, brooding and intent, her lean, ugly face dropping from the flushed warmth to a surly, lined hardness.

'Give her some chapatis, ohe Sitalgar,' the Mahant ordered, 'and some lentils,' and he went back to his seat.

The boy's body on the terrace turned and heaved and his eyes opened with a start. His father fell upon him with cries and pressed him limbs, turning the while to the Mahant and uttering short cries of gratitude, 'You are blessed!' Blessed is the Wah Guru! Blessed are you, oh you of the line of the saints of Nandpur!'

The audience, which had missed many heartbeats whispered, 'Wah Guru!' Wah Guru!'

The bells in the temple were tinkling for evening worship and everyone felt a sense of relief after the orgy of the miracle.

Lalu busied himself serving the drink he had prepared, and thus avoided the obligation of breathing the word of the Lord. And, during the general confusion of holy oaths and the preparation for prayer which ensued, he slunk away.

As he descended the hill, he traced the forms of Uttam Singh, the mason, and Deep Singh, the carpenter, apparently just returned from work on the construction of the Power House, repairing to the monastery to fulfil the 'service of the saints', while the peasants who had gone to the fields to answer the call of nature were converging from other directions.

VI

THE TWILIGHT was falling as if the hand of God was throwing invisible dust into the open eyes of the world. The things of sense and the things of thought were mingling in a veil of mist across the horizon. But now and then there was the anxious tremor of a whispering wind across the yellow, the copper-red and the waxen green of groves which had not yet shed their leaves on the dust.

Lal Singh did not believe in the miracle. He had seen in happen many times before. And he knew there was some explanation for the cure even through he had not the faintest notion of what the explanation could be. He did not want to believe in it, though he could not justify his incredulity. He didn't want to be blinded, though the violent, flashing thrusts of the spell had penetrated the crevices in the armour of his soul.

As he walked along towards the fields by the well at the foot of the hill where the boys of the village generally gathered if they did not go to play Kabadi near the canal head, he was agitated. His baffled, hungry eyes lowered over his frame and then looked up to gaze across the distance.

'In what enchantment was I bound?' he asked himself. 'Was it the trick of a juggler, or did the mad mother really have some power?'

The Mahant, of course, had done nothing. But Chandi was crazy and demented and could not he deceiving people. Perhaps she did possess some peculiar faculty. He had seen a snake-charmer in the town demonstrate a cure for snake bite by having himself bitten by a poisonous cobra and then applying on the wound a herb which sucked up the poison. Had Chandi applied a herb too, while no one was looking? Or could she have sucked up the poison? It was possible that she cured people of such bites with a herb and only played the other tricks at the Mahant's orders, to create the air of mystery. For the doctors in the town who had learnt the science of medicine could cure snake bite too, and without going into a trance.

The air was thick with a strange, heavy odour as of musk or dhup, which intermingled with the shrubs by the pipal trees by the well and the solid walls of the monastery and the pinnacles of the graves. The mausoleums seemed weighted by the shadows of ghosts, hobgoblins, bhuts and fairies.

He sat down to rest on a boulder half-way down the hill, which overlooked the houses of the village menials, ruminating on the bare, rugged contours of the familiar landscape. In the dirty courtyard of the cowherd's lightless, lousy, pest-ridden houses, by the mounds of dry cow-dung cakes, some children were dragging the life out of a calf, pushing her, pulling her, and mauling her about. He could hear the ringing tones of their abuse, 'May you die, you bad calf, may you die!' as they tortured the poor thing.

Cruel, twisted, stunted brats! Where did they get their strength, for they were lean and pot-bellied, and yet they were beating her now because she would not move?

'Ohe, ohe! Stop it!' he wanted to call out. But just then an elderly man rose from where he had been eking the last drop from a cow, casually wrested the calf from the onslaughts of the children, and sent her splashing across the mixed dough of urine and dung to the teats of her mother. The calf applied its mouth, but after a few pulls turned away and bleated hungrily.

Lalu was disgusted at the callousness of the cowherd. He turned his gaze disconsolately to where his friend, Ghulam, the weaver boy, lived with his mother in a small hovel. It was a filthy room, cramped with a loom in the middle, an oven on one side and a huge bedstead on which the whole family slept on the other. And sheep, hens and cocks revelled among their droppings all over the place, reeking with several varieties of smell, and slimy with dirt.

"These Muhammadans are dirty," his mother always said, "all they live for is to eat meat twice a day."

But each man sees beams in other's eyes and not in his own. They were dirty, indeed, but they were the poorest people in the village.

He felt impatient with himself as he heard his own voice muttering in the dark, and he bent to pick up a pebble from the ground.

Instantly he found his eyes blinded by the pressure of someone's grasp. For a moment he did not know who it could be. But then, suddenly, he shouted : 'Gughi,' and protested, with a laugh, 'Let go, you swine.'

'First beg my pardon for the abuse with which you were fouling your tongue,' mocked Gughi.

'No, you fool, let go,' Lalu called.

'Now beg my forgiveness both for the abuse with which you were fouling your tongue and for calling me a fool,' said Gughi.

'Ohe, you illegally begotten, leave go,' shouted Lalu, spluttering with laughter and with irritation.

'Now you will have to draw ten lines on the ground with your nose to expiate the sin of calling in question my mother's honour,' said Gughi, tightening his grip over Lalu's eyes.

Lalu laughed and appealed to Gughi again to release his grasp. But he knew that the imp was up to mischief as usual. He would have to play the same game.

'Acha then, look out!' he challenged.

'Acha, you can try to get free,' Gughi replied.

Thereupon Lalu lifted his arms, encircled Gughi's neck, and heaved him off the ground so that the boy lay stretched before him after a somersault, laughing at his own discomfiture.

But a moment later, as Lalu relaxed and stretched his arms, Gughi darted back and fell upon Lalu's neck, straining to dislodge him from the boulder on which he was sprawling. But Lalu tightened his muscles. The resilience of his frame, fed by a doting mother on cream and the sherbet of beaten almonds, and steeled through toil, would not yield. Gughi wrestled hard, exerting the full weight of his body till he hung like a meagre garland of flesh round his friend's neck. But he could not move him. Only Kalu, the mangy black dog, who was a special friend of

Gughi, and had been following him, came barking and yelping.

'Now, you wait, my son,' Lalu whispered, and, encircling Gughi's waist with his left hand, he lifted him above his head and threatened to fling him down the hill, to teach him a lesson.

'Ohe, put me down, put me down,' Gughi now cried. 'I forgot, I forgot.'

'Just you wait,' said Lalu, with mock grimness. 'You will forget to play all your tricks if I swing you round with my arms.'

'Oh dear, brother Lal Singh,' Gughi prayed in a mock respectful tone, 'put me down, please, put me down. I forgot.'

'Acha, promise you will behave.'

'I promise.'

Lalu lifted Gughi from where the boy hung precariously in the air like a dumb-bell, and, planting him on the earth, returned to his boulder. When they had settled down after these 'formal' greetings, Lalu inquired affectionately, 'Why did you come creeping life a thief, swine? And how did you know I was here?'

'I called at your house, and brother Sharm Singh told me you had gone to the monastery, and at the monastery your Bapu told me you had just left. I guessed you would go towards the fields. You don't need the wisdom of Aflatun to find out anyone's whereabouts, do you, fool?'

Lalu was about to dig Gughi's ribs for an answer, but the boy edged away. He knew what to expect. And Lalu smiled and then suddenly he fixed his eyes on Gughi's face as if he were discovering it anew. It was only a shade lighter than the indigo dusk that was fast descending on the hill. But Lalu was familiar with every feature of the impish visage—the snub nose with generous secretions trailing down in a sickly slime and the small eyes above, and the thick-lipped, almost chinless mouth, showing teeth ferocious as a monkey's.

'I had to take a bundle of silk which Bapu brought from town for that rouge of a Mahant,' said Lalu casually,

to explain his absence from home at the time when his friends usually called to fetch him.

'When did your Bapu come back?'

'In the morning. He says there is not going to be much of a Diwali fair this year, as prices are falling. Still we must go. You are coming, aren't you? He probably said that about the fair to persuade me not to go. Besides, he is not very well.'

'I wish Jhandu was not well,' Gughi said, without any filial piety. His father, Jhandu, was an expropriated peasant who now plied a yekka on hire.

'Why?'

'Because I shan't be able to go to the fair if he is safe and sound. He has been overhauling his carriage in readiness to run it at the fair. And if he goes, someone will have to stay behind to look after the house.'

'None of his wives will run away in his absence and I don't think you could keep his house in order if you stayed behind. Nobody can control your mother's tongue nor that of Wazir Begum when once they begin a quarrel. So why worry? When the time comes, you will get there all right, if I know anything about you.'

'No this is true talk.' said Gughi, an urgent anxiety in his voice, 'I can't go. I asked Jhandu today.'

For a moment he felt constrained by the dread of his father and couldn't speak.

'I have told you,' said Lalu sympathetically, 'that my Bapu didn't seem to like the idea of my going, either, and brother Sharm Singh even forbade me when I broached the matter today. But we will get there in some way.'

'It is different for you,' said Gughi, a little self-pityingly. ' "You can sleep or wake at your own pleasure".'

Lalu realized the difference. He knew he had been the favoured child of his parents, petted and spoiled ever since he was a baby. For his people, though poor peasants, still owned ten acres and belonged to a family with the prestige of a big name behind it, although their fortune was declining through debt and mortgages and the seizure of land by the landlord. And besides, while Gughi had

wallowed in the mire of the village lanes, clad in rags, doing all sorts of jobs, from running errands for the village shop-keepers, or sweeping the horse-dung in the stables of the landlord, to filling hookahs for the bullock-cart drivers, water-carriers, grass-cutters and menials who lived in the porches of the Mughal caravanserai where his father had erected two self-contained huts in the old ruins. Lalu had been to school. He had lived in a boarding-house at Sherkot for some years, and earned a reputation for good behaviour because he had not been seen by the elders of the village. Gughi, of course, had always been a familiar sight at Nandpur. He had become notorious for the excessive high spirits he brought to the execution of his tasks and his lively impishness, which distinguished him as a black-guard among the fraternity of langotia yars, of whom Churanji, the sahukar's son, Amar Singh, the son of Fateh Singh, the retired risaldar, Ghulam, the weaver boy, Sheikhu, the potter-boy and Gopal, the cowherd, were the other distinguished members.

'Don't you care for the tunda lat!' said Lalu. But the meaningless phrase 'limp lord,' their stock-in-trade for changing the conversation, or taking the sting off a hurt, proved for once inadequate.

There was a tense silence between the two friends, The damp, dewy odour of the autumn night mixed with smoke over the village and transmuted the uneven lengths of the houses into eerie fantastic shapes as if they were conjured out of some witches' cauldron which burnt in the gory sunset before them. Neither of the pair moved.

Then Lalu felt the smouldering fire of resentment rise in his bones. He ground his teeth and muttered something incoherent. But then his head dropped down. From behind his neck the weight of a heavy darkness descended on his forhead. All the length and breadth of his being seemed to have been poisoned by a breath.

'Where are the others today?' Gughi asked. His moments of depression were usually fleeting.

'Churanji's father wouldn't let him out of sight, and I could not make a sign to him as I passed by their shop,

and Ghulam's mother abused me when I called.'

'Rape daughters! They won't let the boys play even for an hour.' But he saw that his friend had not been listening.

The fire of resentment that had been smouldering ever since midday in Lalu's heart now spluttered in his flesh. This was the thing. And he shook his head fiercely. They were always forbidding you to do this and that, these elders, always curtailing your liberty. Always frustrating your desires. Always frustrating. You couldn't even laugh in their presence. You had to join your hands gravely and say, 'I fall at your feet'. And they were ridiculous fools, ugly, uncouth lumps of flesh wide-eyed, open-mouthed simpletons, saying prayers and murmuring the name of God all day, even as they lasciviously eyed the young girls passing in the bazaar.

His head dropped forward again. If only . . . . if only what? What could he do? What could any one of them do? The other boys dutifully submitted to their parents, and took the side of the elders if there was ever a question of disobedience by a boy of the village. And if you decided to run away, what could you do without money? Life was without meaning anyhow.

'What is the matter?' asked Gughi. Usually he ignored Lalu's moodiness, but to-night he felt that he was responsible for the sudden silence of sadness that hung his friend's head down.

'I am furious,' Lalu said with the natural frankness with which the peasant in him pursued the truth of his being with devastating relentlessness. And he quivered with a heavy, oppressive malevolence, feeling he had made the wrong choice.

'You will come to the fair, Gughi,' he challenged suddenly.

'All right!' Gughi said, 'I will come.'

'No matter what happens?' insisted Lalu with a smile.

'No matter what happens,' Gughi laughed. And he rose and, as if determined not to let his buoyancy be smothered by any other suggestion, he slapped Lalu on the

thigh according to the familiar custom of wrestlers and continued, 'Come, let us go home now.'

'Ohe, you have startled me,' protested Lalu, laughing, as he rose from his seat. 'Teaching me my own tune on my own drum. But tell me, how shall we go to the fair? Shall we walk the distance?'

'No, I have got a plan,' said Gughi, darting through the blue air, cutting a caper, shouting and stamping, hilarious, and then coming back.

'What is it?'

'We will wangle a ride on one of the carts on which the landlord's hay is going to the fair. I will fix up with the driver. He lives near us in the serai.'

'Crafty swine!' muttered Lalu, as he descended the edge of the promontory, in view of the crags and boulders jutting out of the hillock on the right. His eyes followed the course of another of Gughi's capers through the ravine beyond which was the village.

And he suddenly leapt up and gave chase to his friend to 'pat' him on the back, till Gughi cried out, 'Swine,' by way of affectionate abuse.

Crossing the broken edges of the precipices in the ravine, they entered the village and went along through the narrow alleyways, under the deep shadows of the irregular clay walls, lit up by a sprinkling of stars which peered like the bright eyes of men who had gone to heaven. The deep, rich voices of peasants clustering round smoking fires in the courtyard rose against the gurgling of the hubble-bubbles. The sharp notes of children quarrelling constrasted here with a mother's remonstrance, there with a soothing lullaby or 'once upon a time . . . .'

VII

LALU AND GUGHI scrambled up to the top of the strawladen cart which was already emerging from the village through the doors of the night, and then began to drag Churanji behind them across the dangerously loose wooden

wheel on the left.

'Ohe, come and ascend quickly!' Gughi shouted. Then Lalu and he heaved the boy up with great difficulty and muttered oaths and curses. For Churanji bred on dal and rice, was bloated and heavy and fat, and, on that account, a considerable embarrassment to Lalu and Gughi. And both were running a risk, taking him away to the town without his father's permission. But he had more money than they, saved up from the pocket expenses his mother gave him behind his father's back. And the cunning of the design he had conceived and laid before the gang had appealed to them.

'Amar Singh will be in Manabad, since he lives at the boarding-house by his school, and we might meet him there if he doesn't think himself too superior,'. Churanji had said, 'though he is a bit of a kill-joy. That leaves Ghulam and me, because Sheikhu and Gopal and the others have work to do. Well, if I run away with you, then Ghulam can offer to come and look for me, and his mother will agree to let him go on an errand for my father, because she owes him money. And so we will all be together at the fair.'

Churanji breathed hard, and was going to stand up to wipe the profuse sweat which his round body exuded so easily.

'Lie flat, swine,' said Gughi, levelling him with a quick flourish of his arm. 'The village is still in sight, and the household of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh is travelling in the bullock cart ahead. If we are seen so soon, the driver will have no option but to drop us. And you can't walk a foot with all that fat on your body.'

Churanji lay down panting for breath like a tired buffallo. But he was a cherubic, puffed-up, bright little fool, too garrulous to remain quiet for long.

'Have you brought a pack of cards?' he asked, lifting his head.

'Who's talking of cards? We have brought some sweets as well, your honour,' said Gughi. 'And you will have your share, though you go off eating on your own whenever you buy sweets, mean devil.'

'Ohe, don't begin fighting at once, you two; first take a little rest,' said Lalu, with the mock composure of an elder, as he undid the buttons of his shirt to the slow breeze that came from the north, and opened his eyes to the streams of light which poured forth from the moon, which was a day short of its full maturity, and from the stars that hung down from the azure sky as if the heavens were celebrating their feast of lanterns a day earlier than the men on earth, all for their benefit.

'Where are the cream-cakes, then, Sardar Bahadur?' mocked Gughi.

'The basket is tied up next to my new clothes,' said Lalu casually.

'Acha then. Permit me to disturb your rest,' said Gughi. 'We feel hungry and you have made a pillow of the bundle.'

'Who's the nuisance now?' said Lalu, lifting his head. 'Didn't I hear you say we were not to sit up lest we be seen?'

'Han,' put in Churanji, 'the lover of his mother! He always does everything he forbids others to do.'

'No, the danger is past now,' said Gughi, winking with brazen assurance. And he made haste to open the bundle to make sure that Lalu's new clothes had not mixed with the sweets and been spoilt. For if they were, Lalu might refuse to lend him the old shirt and tehmet he was wearing to change into from his own rags at the fair on the morrow.

But Lalu's mother had tied a difficult knot on top of the wrappings. After straining his hands to open it, Gughi was going to apply his teeth, when Lalu good-humouredly brushed him aside and wrested the bundle out of his hand.

'All right, monkey,' he said. 'You will tear the clothes to tatters.' And he easily undid the knot which had already been loosened by Gughi's efforts. Then, with an exaggerated show of his own importance, he mocked triumphantly, 'Look, ohe good-for-nothing scamp!'

Gughi snatched at the basket of cream-cakes and, digging his hands into it, dragged out a handful and began

to smack his lips as if he were munching the sweets voraciously.

'Ohe!' cried Churanji, panic-stricken at the possibility of being deprived of a good share of the sweets.

'Acha, acha, rest in peace, brother,' said Gughi, dropping the game. 'Everyone will get according to the size of his stomach.'

'Then I get the most,' burst out Churanji, making capital of the phrase Gughi had let drop in an unguarded moment, 'because I have a bigger belly than you two.'

'No, I meant everyone will get according to the strength of his stomach,' said Gughi. 'And on that principal, Lalu gets the most, I less than he, and you less than I.'

'I knew it would come to that, cheat,' protested Churanji.

'You get more sweets at home than we do,' said Gughi half-maliciously.

'Fools, don't quarrel about my sweets,' said Lalu. 'Give them to me, ohe Gughi, and I will put them down here, and then we can all eat together.'

Gughi gave up the basket, and they all fell to. At first they ate calmly. Then Gughi snarled as Churanji gulped two cream-cakes at once, and himself grabbed a handful and filled his mouth till his cheeks bulged. At this, Lalu snatched a portion. Thereupon Gughi swept the basket in a wild rush. And scrambling, shaking, pushing, they scattered their spoil on the rumbling hay cart and swallowed and spat, munched and chewed amid gulps of hysterical laughter.

After this Gughi lay back and began to hum a tune out of sheer light-heartedness. Churanji got hold of the cards and after shuffling them, tried to see if the marks on their surface were visible in the night.

Lalu contemplated the fields by the road on which the cart was travelling. They were all freshly ploughed, except in patches were the grass grew, or the stalks or unharvested millet which would be cut soon, because there was a scarcity of fodder. The monsoon had not been too good,

and the peasants' stock of hay had been depleted by the demands of the market.

His eyes lingered over the furrows of the newly ploughed fields. He felt they were not deep enough, and thought with some satisfaction that he himself had ploughed the family fields better. As he lay back in the cart, he could almost feel the fresh, moist, upturned sod clinging to his feet, cool and crumbling. He was irritated by it at times and yet he liked it.

It was just the feeling he had had when he used to practise wrestling. He liked walking behind the plough, twisting the tails of his straining bullocks. Ever since his childhood it had been his ambition to grow up quickly and be a man, and learn to plough like his brothers and Harnam Singh, as a master of the land, swinging along with heavy strides, mouthing foul curses to the beasts which were yoked to their scratching ploughs. He had been a naive fool then, he thought.

He looked deep through the moonshine into the vast, open bare fields for some hidden meaning, some intricate subtlety which held him in thrall. But the hedgeless layers which spread for miles and miles and miles held no secret, apart from the memory of the feel of the moist earth on his feet, and the sense of a vague inner largeness, as if he had increased in stature since he had begun working on the land. And yet, because he had not been this way for months, he looked deeper and deeper into space, led on by a strange curiosity, till his gaze was frustrated by the meeting of the earth and the sky, of the darkness and light, in the single line of the horizon.

The shadow of his mother's face emerged, a sly, whimsical smile on her lips, and on her chin the air of a tyrant's determined resolve to do what she liked. But she was kind to him, he thought. She had encouraged him to go to the fair, and had given him money to spend.

Then he became conscious of the heavy, brooding, humming silence that spread, layer upon layer, over the earth and beyond. And knowing that the land did not end where the darkness met the rim of light, that Sherkot

lay one way and Manabad the other, he began to wonder what lay beyond that, what worlds there were, and what happened in those worlds.

The single note of a melody which Gughi had been singing gave place just then to the high falsetto of the toomba and disturbed Lalu's thoughts. At first he was embarrassed by it, but then the rhythm of the folk-song rose sympathetically in his blood.

'Won't you play cards? Ohe, let us play cards,' Churanji's entreating voice rose against the high-pitched sequence of savage musical cries.

There was a gap between the peasant boys and Churanji, the son of a father and mother who originally came from a city. He was not inured to the more natural manners of the village, for though born there, he had not inherited its kind of phosphorus which could kindle into life through a breath of the elements. And the crude, hilarious song inspired in him a vague discomfiture.

But the high whimsical falsetto of the toomba broadened into a hearty joke, as the contagion of its spirit caught the driver of the cart, and the driver of the cart in which the landlord's family travelled, further on. And the light, clear sky, rich with stars, spread above the soft breeze in a dithyramb of sound, reverberating now like gong-notes, now like cymbals, and now like the drawn-out barking of a wolf or a she-hyena, till the throats of another peasant party travelling to the fair on some far-off invisible road responded with an echo, which called forth yet, another echo from another party farther afield. And the atmosphere throbbed and melted with the piercing melody, with the jerky words and the shrill laughter of the chorus, and the whole earth was filled with a sudden happiness, a shrill rapture of bucolic joy. He felt this earth had got into his blood.

'Who is on top of our hay cart?' a voice rang out after the chorus, as Gughi and Lalu sat up after all, and took the cards which Churanji was forcing upon them.

The boys listened tensely for a moment. Then, with a

violent jolt through the ruts of the muddy road, their cart suddenly stopped. The air was filled with premonitions and the boys quivered. Perhaps an officious servant of the landlord had objected and they were to be cast off hardly two or three miles from the village. But to their surprise, the driver of the cart raised his head and said, 'Ohe, budmasho, there is this little child and his sister who won't go to sleep and insist on sitting with you. Make a little room for them.'

And he lifted Tara, whom they knew to be the landlord's youngest son, a little boy of eight, heavy-lidded with sleep, and then his elder sister, Maya. She had seemed a baby when Lalu last saw her, but she now looked as tall as Gughi as she clambered up the hay and asked in the mock voice of a grandmother, 'What are you playing at, boys? I want to play with you.'

'Go away, go away. You have no business to come and sit among men,' said Gughi as she began to settle down demurely.

'You keep silent, monkey face,' she said pertly. 'I want to play.'

'Maya, good sister, it's a man's game,' said Churanji, who also felt too important a man to admit a girl to the game.

'He's got a jack of clubs and a . . . .' she shouted cheekily peering at Churanji's cards.

'Oh, that has spoilt the game,' shouted Churanji. 'I shall have to deal the cards again.'

'No, no,' bawled Gughi.

'Acha, childling,' said Lalu to the girl. 'Come, you come and look at my cards this time, and you can join in at the next deal.'

She leaned over Lalu's shoulder, and to assert the right which she had won against the wishes of Churanji and Gughi, she poked her tongue out at both of them.

'Look at her face,' Gughi exclaimed. 'She looks like a witch, like Kali, the black goddess.' And he poked his tongue out at her in return.

Involuntarily Lalu found himself looking at Maya's

face. He had never had the chance to observe it so closely before, since, as a maturing girl of fourteen, Maya was not allowed to walk about in the village. It was a shapely oval, coloured with the bloom of gold, with a pair of grey eyes, so rare in North India, which twinkled with a mischievous, haughty, reckless gaiety, except when they were dipped shyly into the dark rims around the pools of light in their whites, and put into relief the sharp nose and the lips which pouted with an impetuous smile. By no stretch of imagination could she be compared to the black goddess, for she was fair complexioned and dispersed happiness like sunshine.

'You look more like Kali yourself,' Lalu mocked Gughi.

'Han, he looks more like her, pig dog,' Maya said, taking her cue from Lalu.

And truly Gughi's black face with its red tongue bulging out beneath the snub nose looked astonishingly like the image of Kali, although it was more ridiculous than sinister. Lalu and Churanji went into fits of laughter.

Gughi took advantage of the confusion and, in order to revenge himself for his discomfiture, snatched the cards from Lalu's hands and began to reshuffle them.

'Fool,' cried the girl. 'I wanted to play that deal. We had such nice cards. We could have beaten you.'

'He is a fool and a knave,' Lalu insisted. He also had wanted to play that deal, because the warmth of the girl leaning over him had affected his skin with the thrill of rapture and made him suddenly aware of her.

'Acha, don't you bark,' said Gughi casually, though not without a trace of malice in his voice. He was hurt at Lalu's joke at the instigation of a slip of a girl who happened to be the daughter of the landlord.

'Don't mind his snarls,' said Lalu to Maya, 'you come and be my partner, there, opposite.'

The girl moved up, dragging her little brother, who was now sound asleep with his head on her lap as she sat in the lotus seat. For the first time Lalu had a full view of her face, and he stared at the curves of her cheeks which promised to become perfectly regular when the bloom of

innocence and the babyish laugh would mature into the dignity of womanhood.

Gughi, inspired with a fresh outburst of energy and enthusiasm, redealt the cards and they began to bid.

Just then a shrill stentorian voice came from the bullock cart ahead. 'Maya, ni Maya, eater of your husband. May you wither away. Have you no shame that you go sitting among men? Your little brother will catch a chill and die. You are not a child now. You must learn to be ashamed and modest.'

And then the carts came to a standstill as suddenly as before, and the driver lifted the son of the landlord and ran down to take him back.

Maya stood nervously perched on the side of the cart, wondering whether she should climb down unaided. Lalu leapt down to the driver's shaft and lifted the girl in his grasp, and the driver came rushing back and set her down on her road.

She ran away quickly.

Lalu stood there with the feeling of her slender body which had flown out of his hand without looking back, like a bird, his heart touched by an eagerness that his fear of the landlord's family sharpened into an acute embarrassment. The picture of the girl suddenly blurred in his mind. Only the perfume of her body remained, and the memory of her touch spread over his senses.

He struggled up into the cart. A strange confusion, the sweet turbulence of a joy that was mixed with regret, quickened his pulse. He felt as if he had just risen to the edge of a perilous precipice beyond which was the black pit of an emptiness, sheer and sudden and vast.

He lay down in order to steady himself. As his chest pressed the palms of his hands which lay between him and the hay, he could hear his heart pounding in a dull thud, thud.

And before his eyes, the lingering desire for the girl's presence hovered and became evanescent like the elusive smell of the mischievous baby's body and the happiness that was in the bloom of her face. Gughi and Churanji

had ducked their heads beneath a blanket and lay stretched out simulating sleep.

'Fools, fools,' Lalu muttered under his breath. 'If only they had not made such a row.'

'The boat of our lives has been wrecked,' said Gughi, poking his head out.

'The boat of my life has certainly been wrecked,' said Lalu mocking to hide his feelings. And beyond the words, he was immersed in a half-incandescent darkness, full of the intoxicating warmth of the straw beneath him, and of the cruelty of the moon and the stars above.

VIII

LALU opened his eyes earlier than usual. For he had had a fitful half-sleep, agitated by the cold, and by the broken rhythm of a verse that the sight of Maya had written on his heart. He had known sleepless nights in the past when the presence of his eldest brother's will, or the sneers of one of the elders, had wounded him, or when he was obsessed with a thought that had suddenly pierced his mind during the day, and turned it over and over in his mind at night. But this time it was an excitement which augured well and yet seemed doomed to failure.

The dawn was breaking with a sharp, autumnal breeze that came numbed by the ground frost and the still mist that enveloped the land.

Agitated by this inexplicable ache of pleasure-pain, he yawned and stretched his arms and legs like a hunter's bow and shot the arrow of a kick into Gughi's side, smiled and, brimful to the energy that welled up in him, turned and rolled in the glow of his own warmth.

'Ohe, don't,' Gughi's voice rumbled miserably from where they all lay curled up under a blanket.

Lalu kicked him again lightly from the side where Churanji lay heaped.

Just as Lalu had hoped, Gughi thought that it was Churanji kicking him. He let loose a furious kick at the

backside of the sahukar's son, so that Churanji was pushed right out of the blanket against the bamboo pole that guarded the hay from falling over on the side.

The boy sat up, rubbing his thickly gritted eyes and curshed. 'Ohe you let me sleep.'

'Come, let's teach the swine a lesson, Churanji,' said Lalu sympathetically, eager to hold the balance of power between them. And he dragged the blanket off Gughi, baring his flimsily clad body.

But Gughi was not going to let either of them get the better of him. He pretended to take no notice of the removal of the blanket.

'Stubborn ass!' called Churanji.

There was no answer. Gughi did not stir. But he hadn't counted on all the tricks the others could play on him.

Lalu began to heap handfuls of straw on his head.

Sneezing, snorting, puffing, blowing, like a young colt, Gughi reared and rose upon his feet, swearing the while. Then, affecting the fury of an animal at bay, he fell upon his hunters. And there was a mock fight, during which Gughi mounted upon the groaning Churanji and Lalu pressed his right leg upon the protesting Gughi.

'Ohe, budmash, what are you up to?' called the driver, who had been dozing as he held the reins of the bullocks.

Gughi and Churanji hastily wrested the blanket from Lalu, ducked their heads into their arms and went to sleep again.

Lalu leaned on his elbow and saw that both before and behind the landlord's two carts, other carts had joined in during the night, the tapering hulks of some of them curtained and hooded against the lustful stares of the strangers, the broad backs of others loaded with hay and fodder, men and women and children, others still bare and empty, except for jumbles of ropes and heaps of sacks.

The pale-red flame of an occasional hurricane lamp at the head of caravans converging from other roads towards the fair, swayed in the distance and mocked the awakening elements. Across the last lap of ploughed earth, beyond

the telegraph poles that stood like wary sentinels of civilization, along the badly paved stone roads on which they now travelled, beyond the thick forest of banana trees, the sky was flushed with the uprush of the sun.

Lalu raised his hand to the turban that had become loose during the night and, demolishing it at a stroke, he began to retie it. As he smoothed the yards of cloth in his hand, he felt a slight uneasiness at the thought that they were nearing the town. The perturbation increased as, while doing up his turban, he found that the bun of hair on top of his head had come undone as usual. He pulled the ivory comb which held the end of the twisted coils, unwound the long rope from the knot and dropped it before his eyes. What an untidy mess! And with a fury that took its cue from the impatience of his mood, he said determinedly to himself : 'Religion or no religion, I shall have it cut in town. I won't return to the village with this long hair on.'

The prospect of seeing himself in a new guise sent subtle thrills of fear through his body. He had decided to do this even while he was in the village. No one could say it was done in a moment of excitement, without due deliberation.

He hurried to do up his hair, as he thought that people might be looking. 'But it will be the last time,' he said to himself, 'that I shall feel embarrassed on account of these infernal coils.'

Before he had combed out the tangles and rolled the hair into a knot, the bullock cart came to a standstill.

'Oh, the vessel of my life,' he muttered. And he hastily tied up his turban, the determination of his thoughts quickening.

'Ohe, descend, ohe, come down, boys,' called the driver of the cart. 'Here we are at the toll-gate.'

'Acha,' Lalu called, to let the man know that they were awake and also to gain time. He kicked Gughi and Churanji and urged in a quick whisper, 'Wake up, ohe, wake up.'

'Keep quiet,' Gughi answered back across the dribbling

saliva which came from the sides of his open mouth on to the arm on which he had pillowed his head, while Churanji moaned in his half-sleep.

'Come down, come down, ohe, illegally begotten,' shouted the dark, sunken-checked, heavy-browed Hindu clerk who kept the toll-gate, the ritualistic tuft-knot on the top of his head shaking with an exaggerated fury as he stretched the sacred thread round his shrunken, shrivelled-up body, naked except for a pair of English shorts.

'Come, ohe Gughi and Churanji,' said Lalu. 'The babu has heen eating red chillies and feels like having a wrestling match.'

The boys got up and scrambled down, Lalu first, then Gughi, while Churanji still stood on top, afraid of falling as he hung on the bamboo pole.

'Come down, dog,' shouted the babu, dragging Churanji down.

Lalu was going to ask him to keep his paws off his companion, but the driver of the cart forestalled him.

'I don't know if we have awakened you too early,' he blustered, 'but keep your hands off that kid. His father can buy you and the whole lot of your city folk. And these, you may be pleased to know, are the carts of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, the landlord of Nandpur. So . . . .'

'Acha, acha, keep quiet,' the babu said, softening at the mention of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh. Withdrawing his gaze from the cart, he asked, 'Anything to declare? You are not smuggling anything in that hay, are you?'

'No,' said the driver.

'Acha then, move on after the others,' the munshi said. Then he turned to Lalu and Gughi and asked : 'Are you the Sardar Bahadur's servants?'

'His humble slaves,' Lalu said, with mock humility.

'All right then, go ahead,' the munshi ordered, and proceeded to examine the carts at the back.

The boys began to walk ahead to stretch their legs and warm up in the glow of the sun's crisp fire that was crackling at the rim of the sky. But they could not refrain from looking back to see what the munshi would do to the herd

of goats that had charged up and intercepted his progress to the carts behind. They saw the herdsman hand over a jug of milk to the man to pay for his crime, and to secure an easy passport to town. The munshi's frown turned to a smile as he called one of his assistants who was busy arranging the pitchers of clarified butter, cheese and milk which he had collected from preceding carts as his own commission for granting the right of way, in addition to the cash that was due on fodder and livestock to the Sarkar at the toll-gate.

'I wouldn't mind becoming a babu like that,' said Churanji.

'You will be a worse swine than that when you grow up, Lalla Churanji Lall,' said Gughi, 'if you are the son of your father.'

'This is no time for compliments, you two. It is the sacred hour of early morning,' said Lal Singh with feigned religiosity, as he heard some peasants praying fervently. 'Come and mention the name of God and relieve yourselves.' he continued, 'otherwise you will get no occasion to do so in town.'

No one answered, and he began to throw lumps of earth in all directions.

When this still did not elicit any response, after a studied, pause, he shouted, 'The carts are moving. They have gone. You are left behind.'

Churanji rushed towards the waterway, only to find that the caravan was still at a standstill. As he returned to the field again, he was mocked by Gughi's laughter.

But Lalu evened the score when they met by the waterway to wash themselves by catching Gughi unawares and ducking his head in the canal.

In the midst of these frivolities they heard the noise of creaking wheels and rushed again towards the cart. The driver was just getting on the shaft and trying to catch hold of the tails of the bullocks, so they were in time to mount up to the hay where a swarm of flies had usurped their place.

The cavalcade moved on, past the bars of the district jail, past shady English bungalows, uncanny with the dread of all the invisible white men behind them, past orange groves and playing fields, across a railway bridge on the side of which the town of Manabad became visible, a mushroom growth of tall houses and small houses, gold-domed temples and cement-domed mosques, garishly refulgent in the red splendour of the ascending sun. At last they reached the Grand Trunk Road.

Here the carts were suddenly held up by an invisible force that shouted and stormed in the clouds of dust that rose across the sky. 'Sons of dogs! Keep in lime! Dirty rustics! Yokels!'

This abuse was all that could be heard for a moment.

But then a sub-inspector of police, dressed in khaki uniform, could be seen advancing on the back of a grey mare towards a bullock cart ahead of the vehicle in which the landlord's family travelled, five policemen behind him. He was shouting as he struck the driver with a cane.

'Why did you barge so dangerously into the road, seed of a donkey?'

'Others had entered the road before me, Sarkar. I was only following,' the man wailed, 'Others . . . .'

'Shut up, cur,' the thanedar shouted. 'Shut up and go your way slowly.'

The carts began to move through the dust which had been stilled for a minute and became part of a current of tongas, yekkas, camels, bullocks, cows, goats and horses.

But hardly had the wheels screeched and rumbled and groaned a hundred yards forward before some peasants, crowded in the cart of the driver who had been beaten, began to grumble to one another at the behaviour of the thanedar.

'How he swaggers,' said one of them.

'Give a man a uniform and he thinks he is God Almighty,' proclaimed another loudly.

'They are all the same, swinish when they are in authority, hitting the innocent and the poor,' said a third.

'Did I hear you grumbling?' said the sub-inspector,

suddenly racing up the road, the heels of his horse scattering dust and fire, thrusting aside the black-legged, white-bearded peasants who trudged on foot with bundles on their backs and staves in their hands, and trampling on the bodies of tattered beggars. And he began to beat the occupants of the cart who had been talking, while the policemen behind him made a charge on the falling, tottering pedestrians who called out for mercy.

The boys craned their necks to see what was happening and then suddenly withdrew their gaze and lay back, dumb and mute with fear, till a quarter of a mile ahead the shouting and the stamping, the weeping and the wailing again gave place to wild talk and laughter.

The traffic became thickest beyond the little tank of Ramsar on the banks of which was a Hindu temple from which throngs of city pilgrims emerged, fat men in fine muslin loin-cloths, starched white, turbans and shirts and gold-embroidered shoes, and pale, thin women in Benarsi silk skirts. They all joined the exodus to the fair. And the cavalcade of carts, tongas, yekkas, phaetons, men and animals now converged from three or four tributaries into a broad, endless stream. On its banks, on the shady side of the road, rows of toys-shops and foodstalls were strewn. And lepers exposed their wounds, and beggars wailed for the gift of a copper.

Farther on, the tops of a vast number of tents became visible, above the clouds of dust that rolled across the wide spaces of barren fields on the left flank of the road. The chorus of neighing horses, cows and buffaloes, and of donkeys' hee-hawing in stupid, endless reiteration became audible above the babble of the seething masses of men.

The boys sat open-eyed, passive, baffled as if occupied by a sense of fear and suspence in the face of the unknown.

The driver brought the cart to a halt in the compound of a wasted garden by the side of which stood a well, a shrine and a mausoleum.

'Come now, come down, boys,' he called, 'before the Sardar Bahadur sees you.'

They crawled down rather sheepishly as if they were

embarrassed at feeling happy in such strange surroundings, full of a queer nervousness and trepidation. The spirit of their adventure seemed to be blighted.

'The thanedar won't beat us as he beat those people, will he?' asked Churanji who had been shivering.

'He is going to handcuff you!' said Lalu laughing.

At this Gughi chuckled with delight. Churanji still hesitated, but then he too smiled embarrassedly at his own cowardice.

IX

GUGHI wanted to run and ride on the roundabout that screeched on its ungreased axle like the wind in a dust storm.

Churanji wanted to eat some fresh fried bread and semolina that a confectioner was preparing in huge black iron cauldrons by the edge of the road.

Lalu wanted to hang round the well on the chance of catching another glimpse of Maya. So he declared that he needed a bath before going round the fair.

After much squabbling, during which Gughi urged that it was useless to have a bath, since they would get covered with dust anyhow during the day, and Churanji that it was useless to go riding a roundabout on an empty stomach first thing in the morning, and Lalu that it was more civilized to bathe before eating or running round, they all agreed to wash before doing anything. But while Lalu drew water from the well in a can that was attached to a string on the scaffolding, Gughi ran and had a ride on the roundabout and Churanji had a snack of fried bread.

Meanwhile the household of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, the landlord of Nandpur, was conducted into a large tent pitched under the scanty shade of a pipal tree under the direction of no less a person than the Sardar Bahadur himself, a whitebearded, stout, little man, cursed by God with leukaderma—a disease that made his face the colour of an Englishman's in the tropics, and endorsed it

with disfiguring patches of brown into the bargain! But he was blessed by fortune with an array of fineries—a, silk turban on his head, a silk uchkin on his body, a white muslin cloth wrapped round his neck, and patent leather pumps on his heavy, bulging feet, over which a fine pair of stockings with a check design showed beneath the folds of the tight white trousers which stuck to the dumb-bell-like legs.

No one could dare to lift so much as an eyebrow before the visage of the Sardar Bahadur, refulgent with that leprous whiteness; strange and yet commanding respect in a world of olivebrown, coffee-coloured and sunburnt men. And intruding a loving stare into the tent was as inconceivable as peeping into the seventh heaven across the presence of an Englishman.

Lalu turned away, not without a trace of self-pity, and hummed a tune, waxing poetical about 'his liver', as he threw can after can of water on his back. The effect of the fresh, cold water in the autumn morning was grimly chastening. And he had to rub himself to normal warmth before he could drop any water on the unwilling heads of Gughi and Churanji.

With shivering limbs and chattering teeth, they all went to the confectioner's stall and sat down on a crude wooden bench which stood near the oven on which the grease sizzled temptingly in a pan.

'Ohe, ohe,' bullied the confectioner, sitting with an enormous white turban but little else on his loose, flabby, bloated body. 'Who are you, Hindu, Mussulman or Bhangi?' and he looked offensively towards Gughi.

'What has it to do with you who he is?' Lalu roared. 'He will pay with money for what he buys.'

'Oh I did not know he was with you, Sardarji,' the man said obsequiously. 'There are so many outcasts here parading as respectable people just because they have made a lot of money, earned by doing menial jobs, I didn't know. Now, what do you desire, Sardarji, some sweets?'

'None of your sweets covered with flies,' said Lalu.

'Some milk then,' the confectioner said. 'I am the

only halwai who gets milk straight from the cow's teats. I have never in my life put water into it. That would be irreligious.'

'So you say,' commented Lal Singh casually.

'May I make you some whey then of curds, or cream-cakes?' the man offered, brushing a swarm of flies from the architecture of jalebis he had made. 'You come from the village of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, don't you? He is my landlord here. He has let me this space for the stall.'

'Is that so?' said Lalu, and he muttered under his breath, 'I thought you two had something in common.'

'You look a learned man,' the confectioner continued to Lal Singh, hoping by his garrulous prattle to mitigate the effect of his initial brusqueness. 'I have also got a son at school. I want him to become a thanedar.'

'Give us four annas, worth of fried bread and semolina each,' Lalu said to cut him short.

'The rate is a rupee a seer,' the confectioner warned, 'and four annas' worth will hardly feed a pigeon, to say nothing of big sardars and lallas like you.'

'There is no talk of that,' said Lalu with the assurance that issued from a confidence in his physique and made him usually take such things easily. He was sorry they had sat down there, but he knew that all the city shopkeepers raised prices during a fair ramp in order to empty the pockets of the poor, ignorant peasants. And though he resented the cheating city folk, he felt angry that the rustics had earned a reputation for stupidity and condemned their offspring to a fundamental unworthiness.

The confectioner weighed out the fried bread and semolina in three leaf-pots, threw a smear of carrot pickle on them, and, before he doled them out, stretched his hand for the money.

Lalu opened a side of his tehmet, got out a woollen wallet which his mother had sewn for him and filled with money, and paid the halwai. Then the boys began to eat, making two morsels of each cake and hastily swallowing their portions without noticing any appreciable difference in

the size of their stomachs. There was hunger in Gughi's eyes and Churanji smacked his lips, while Lalu, anticipating the wish of his companions, lifted his face to order more, when the confectioner suddenly burst upon them.

'Pick up those leaf-pots and throw them somewhere else and not outside my stall!'

Lalu looked at the shopkeeper open-mouthed, the rage of the peasant rising in his veins at this uncalled-for rebuke. His eyes were streaked with red and he longed to seize the man by the scruff of the neck and teach him a lesson. Gughi had already leapt forward and was about to strike, but Lalu controlled his own anger and hastily dragged his friend back.

'Come, let's go,' he said to his companions.

'You wait, rustics. I'll call the police,' shouted the confectioner, who had drawn back apprehensively at the danger of being hit, but now bullied triumphantly though he still clung for safety to his seat.

The boys frowned, looked at each other, smiled awkwardly and began to walk away. Then they laughed aloud at the ridiculous flood of invective and abuse that the halwai had let loose upon them.

Suddenly a policeman with a baton in his hand rushed from behind and shouted, 'Stop, ohe, upstarts, stop.'

'You go and show off to someone else, my friend,' said Lalu. 'You want to have it both ways, a bribe from the confectioner and a bribe from us. I know you and your lot.'

The policeman measured himself by Lalu's frame and, impressed by the well-rounded limbs of his antagonist and by his general air of well-being, said, 'If you don't behave, I shall have to arrest you and take you to the lock-up.'

'Ohe, look, you have lost it,' said Gughi, a serious expression on his face, as he pointed towards the shadows at the man's back.

'What?' the policeman cried, taken aback, and he began to look round himself.

'Your behind,' said Gughi and ran away, cackling.

The policeman had involuntarily put his hand to his

bottom, before realizing he had been fooled, and the crowd roared.

He chased after Gughi, but Gughi was swifter on his bare feet in the tangles of tent-ropes and pegs.

The man 'took his face back' and returned disconsolately to duty.

Lalu's gusto and enthusiasm returned after this ridiculous incident, and he led Churanji across the traffic-infested road, his whole being mounting on the crest of the noise, and warming to the fluster of the crowded sunny morning.

A long stretch of the Grand Trunk Road by the tented maidan had been converted overnight into a great market. Both sides of the thoroughfare were congested with improvised stalls in the midst of which, among the array of cheap food, crude fruit, coarse coloured cloth, beads, bangles, soap, knives, spoons, scythes, brooms, ploughshares and grain, sat tradesmen, hawking their goods in the loudest and most persistent blares.

'Come, Sardarji,' a shopkeeper addressed a rugged peasant with such exaggerated courtesy that even the yokel's donkey blushed.

'Come, Lallaji, come this side. We are a well-known firm. We sell the best quality and we give away yards of cloth as free gifts,' another stallkeeper shouted to a yokel.

'Come Mian Sahib, come Khan Sahib,' still another coaxed a protesting pauper.

Gughi ran towards a man who stood with a pole decorated with coloured paper toys for children, and bought a bamboo whistle with which he shrilled a 'pin pin' into Lalu's ear. And Churanji edged away to buy bananas.

'Go easy with your money, boys,' Lalu said.

'One is only born once,' said Gughi, without pausing to consider the phrase.

'No. One can become immortal, boys,' Lalu said.

'How?' Gughi asked casually.

'There,' Lalu ponited to the words, 'Elixir of Life,' written on a placard worn by a quack who was bawling out at the top of his voice with the self-assured grace of the unashamed, brazen actor.

'My friends, it is the most wonderful, the most marvellous, the most extraordinary potion invented in the seven worlds. It is the essence of all the power that is in the mountains and rivers. It is the life of iron extracted through the magical skill of a sage who knows all the mantras of the hoary, undying Rishis who live in the Himalayas. It is a medicine which will make the old young in a day, which will restore vitality to the weak. If proofs of its efficacy be wanted, my friends, here are the scrolls given to me by Maharajas, Landowners, Judges and Barristers. Here are numerous letters sent me by the kings of Europe, asking for the medicine. Order then, order a bottle at two rupees, half a bottle at one rupee eight annas. It is a golden opportunity. . . .'

'I want two bottles,' a man shouted.

But the quack was a master in the art of building up suspense.

'Wait, my friend, wait,' he said, casually dismissing the voice of his accomplice. 'Let me first explain the virtue of the medicine to those who are not as quick of understanding as you.'

The crowd laughed at this gibe and, after a due pause for the anticipated mirth, the quack renewed his peroration.

'Well, my friends, to be plain, this is the only medicine which certifies a cure for that dire disease of impotency that is abroad in our age. It makes the impotent potent in a day. It makes the feeble strong like lions—all the power, all the glory, all the wealth of this world will be his who—'

'Give me half a bottle,' said a peasant, who stood open-eyed and curious amongst the fast gathering ring of onlookers.

'Two bottles and half a bottle, two orders—but wait, my friends. It seems there are still some who have not heard all about this wonder of our century. And I don't want anyone to have regrets when I go away to distant parts.'

He eyed the crowd brazenly and then, raising his finger to produce a hushed silence, he paused and proclaimed, 'Nowadays a young man declares his bankruptcy long before he has presented his case in the court of his wife's bed.

Nowadays we are fast becoming a race of weaklings. In the old days when we followed the magical formula of the holy sages, men could prolong their physical powers—'

'Give me two bottles, Sheikh Sahib,' interrupted a man. 'I bought half a bottle from you before and the results have been even beyond my highest expectations. Not only myself, but my whole family. . . .'

'The man is a fraud,' Lal Singh muttered to the audience.

The crowd turned round to look at the boy. There were low whispers, a loud voice or two, and abuse. The quack's spell seemed to be broken.

'Don't you mind that youngster,' the quack began sharply, and switched the attention of the audience back to himself. 'Youth,' he continued, with the air of revelation, 'youth, has no respect for anything or anybody in these days. The great saint Shamus Tabriz, before whom the lion and the lamb used to sit in friendship, has said, "If you want good advice, ask the aged," and. . . .'

'Come, leave that boy alone, give me a bottle,' said the first peasant, whose curiosity had been aroused beyond control.

'No, my brother, first come, first served,' said the quack. 'And number one is the Sheikh Sahib here—two bottles, isn't it, Sheikh Sahib?'

'Yes,' promptly replied a stout, perspiring man, dressed in a silk turban, long shirt, and baggy trousers. And he walked up with the money he had ready in his palm. The quack handed the bottles over, though not without a show of reluctance, as if he were parting with a fortune.

'That is his accomplice,' Lalu muttered, but no one heeded him.

'Two bottles for me instead of one,' said the first peasant. And he began to undo the knot of his tehmet. But the knot on the side, which had secured his meagre savings, had been cut clean off the flap. With a dazed expression of horror, he opened his mouth to shout, but could only utter a half-audible whisper : 'Robbed.'

"Beware of pickpockets, my friends, beware of thieves,'

the quack counselled. 'Beware of young scoundrels in these changing times . . .' and he looked towards Lal Singh significantly.

'Come, let us go,' said Lalu, turning round from where he stood among tall men and small men, fat men and lean men, in a circle crowded four girths deep. 'Let's go or we will be suspect. . . .'

But his words came back to his ears without the confirmation of a nod or an answer. For neither Gughi nor Churanji was there. He looked around to see if they had been caught somewhere amongst the crowd and called, 'Ohe, Gughi, Churanji, ohe,' but in vain. He thought they might have gone to the ring which stood round a bamboo stick twenty yards away.

'The joy of battle, the joy of battle, to the sons of Rajputs, the scions of traditional warriors, and to the Sikhs sprung from the loins of tigresses, there is nothing more glorious than the joy of fighting the enemy and destroying him. . . .'

The homily fell on Lal Singh's ears as he searched for Gughi and Churanji in the next ring. He insinuated himself into the crowd and, standing on his toes, craned his neck to see the next quack.

A tall, sturdy lion-faced khalsa, whose mane was dressed up into a fine shape round the jaws by means of an invisible net which rich and respectable Sikh gentlemen use to keep their beards in order, stood dressed in khaki military uniform.

'I have taken part in many campaigns as these medals on my chest, awarded to me by the benign Sarkar, testify. I fought in Chitral on the frontier, in Burma and in Chin. And I have won the respect and affection of angrezi officers. Truly, they are the friends of the poor, these angrez log, truly they are born fighters, grim and determined in battle, lions like us, however small they look. And truly it is the only joy ensured to us children of great fighters to fight for them.'

'Will your foj go to Chin again?' asked a rustic.

'Brothers in battle, comrades at arms,' shouted the havildar, 'the sun never sets on the kingdom of George Panjam,

Padshah of Englistan and Raja-i-Raian of Hindustan. And the privilege shall be ensured to every soldier of his army to go beyond the seas and across the lands whenever duty commands. But just think of the advantages of joining the armies of the King-Emperor, even though you may never go abroad. Apart from the privilege of wearing the uniform, the generous pay of eleven rupees a month, opportunities for travel, just think of the pleasures of the sports you are taught to play. I will tell you about all of these one by one. And don't call me by the name of Lehna Singh if the rewards I disclose to you are not the choicest fruits you can gather this side of paradise. Now about money first, because that is foremost in every man's heart. Believe me, sons of tigresses—I say it by the oath of the Guru Granth. . . .'

'Too good to be true,' Lalu muttered to the audience and, extricating himself from the gathering swarm, looked round for Gughi and Churanji. Not finding them, he went towards another ring where, from the music of the flute that drifted to his ears, he guessed that a juggler was entertaining his audience.

He looked casually round as he walked up, tired and a little irritated. The music of the flute died a sudden death as he reached the fringe of the crowd.

'That the boy under the basket will, by the alchemy of powers given to me by my divine ancestors, turn into a rabbit is certain. But it might not happen. For the formula of magic are difficult to apply in each and every case. And the pains I have taken to hum the incantation must not go unrewarded. There are some in the audience who will fly away without giving me a copper if I should fail in performing the trick, but I know there are others who are more honest. Still, not that I doubt the genius for generosity of this audience, but for the sake of this belly of mine and the belly of the little one who is being turned into a rabbit, those of you who believe in my word and know that I shall not fail them, please throw your pice. And I will say here at once, first may the misers fade. . . .'

'All for the belly,' said Lalu who had often seen boys turned into rabbits. And though others stayed in order not

to appear miserly, he walked away.

He knew Gughi and Churanji would never get lost. They had probably gone off on the roundabout.

And he was not unhappy to be left alone for a while. He wanted to wander through the fair purposelessly, to brood over the tumultuous music of his heart, disturbed by the vision of Maya.

So he strolled along amid the throngs, negotiating his passage past chattering men, gesticulating, vociferous women and children who shouted for glee as they played hide-and-seek across the black soil bestrewn with dung, littered with waste paper and used leaf-pots, and puddled with human and animal urine, across the dense odours that rose like soft down to the sky.

His senses tingled with a queer happiness in this atmosphere. It was all so jolly in spite of the thanedar in the morning, in spite of the confectioner and in spite of all the frauds who were bawling out lies to relieve the peasants of their money. For there was something fascinating in the roguery of these glibtongued city folk.

Why were these peasants taken in so easily? He felt angry at the stupid fool who had been so eager to buy the Elixir of Life. Couldn't he see that the first man who had offered to buy the bottle was an accomplice of the quack? He was amused to recall the way the quack threw the dust of rhetoric into the country folk's eyes. He had felt like laughing at one of his turns of phrase. And he laughed now at the whole show, a slight chuckle, which shot up suddenly to a crescendo and then cracked into hollow mockery.

For suddenly the figure of the foolish peasant loomed large before his mind. It became larger and larger as he advanced, its coarse, rugged hands and paws lined by swelling, varicose veins, coloured black and fearful, its face shrinking into deep hollows as if the life had been wrung out of it through some consuming inner illness, some invisiable disease, and left it twisted and ugly.

He tried to shake the figure off his brain. And in order to quell the disturbing recollection, he plunged right

into the tented maidan and took an improvised pathway which led past the horses snuffling at the grass, past the cows and buffaloes who chewed the cud, past the cowherd women who made cakes of dung and peasants who bargained over the points of their cattle, into another end of the Grand Trunk Road.

But the obsession lingered in his brain. The man was so simple and helpless.

His attention was distracted by the sound of rupees tinkling as a man threw them in the air to test the silver and then slipped them into a hand-knitted white bag. Money, money, money! He hadn't got much in his tehmet and he turned his face away. He had never been able to get over the rudimentary instinct which, used to the batter of goods for generations, regards money as a curse. And his present lack of it and the hungry-naked state of his family's finances strengthened his prejudice. He hastened his steps as if seeking to escape from this market where the gods of profit reigned supreme, and neither urgency of want nor nobility of purpose seemed relevant.

The sun was soaring high overhead, burning the sky into ashes, and the earth into a deep red dust. He wiped the perspiration from his face with a lapel of his shirt, feeling light and insignificant in the wild roar of noises that rolled across the fair.

A thrilling smell of spices was wafted over the sickly foetid odours of dung and urine and sweat. And he realized that he was hungry.

He went towards the cook-shop from where the smell seemed to come. It was a Muhammadan stall, but having come directly to it, he did not want to withdraw.

'Some food,' he mumbled, his head bent and his eyes glancing furtively this side and that.

The Muhammadan stallkeeper eyed him askance since he saw that his customer was a Sikh to whom, as to a Hindu, meat cooked in a Muslim shop was taboo. But he began to fill an earthen saucer with mutton.

A Hindu merchant who had a booth next door shouted to Lal Singh, 'Sardarji, have you left your senses that you

are eating at a Muhammadan shop? But probably they have left you, since the hour of twelve o'clock has struck. At this hot hour, I suppose it is impossible for your head loaded with hair to think at all.'

'Go, go,' said Lal Singh with a false bravado evoked in him by his deliberate breaking of the religious rule. 'Mind your business.'

But he dared not sit down outside the shop and eat his food there. He paid the shopkeeper and asked him to wrap up the bread under the earthen saucer in a piece of paper and went past the fire swallowers, and the strong men who broke chains, the man who bawled out the terms of lotteries for clocks, the hawkers, the holy men who sat naked, smeared with ashes before wooden pyres, the divines who sat on beds of nails or stared at the sun or lifted their bottoms into the air by control of their breathing, past the peasants and the paupers, to the well where he had alighted from the cart in the morning. He sat down and ate his fill of the meat and the crisp bread.

As he stretched himself into a restful position by the roots of a banyan tree, the fatigue of the night and the warmth which the feeding of the 'inner gods' had produced, over-powered him even against his will and he dozed off.

X

GUGHI tickled Lalu's nostrils with a straw and Churanji sprinkled a few particles of dust into the sleeping boy's half-open nouth, while Ghulam, who had managed to be sent to the fair to search for the sahukar's son, sat rolled back in a sheet like a howbata.

Lalu rumbled in his sleep for a moment, shook his head, then got up from his siesta, sneezing and spitting and swearing at the boys who scattered, laughing, yet a little afraid.

'You did that to me in the morning,' Gughi said from a distance, 'and this is my revenge.'

Lalu stretched the muscles of his body taut, yawned,

felt a quickening in his blood and laughed.

'Where did you run away, ohe swine?' he asked.

'We have come to see the fair, not to sleep, son,' Gughi said.

'Did you have any food?' Lalu asked.

'Of course,' Churanji replied. 'We ate meat and bread at a cookshop, then had eight annas' worth of ices, eight annas' worth of sweets, two bottles of soda-water each, and I have bought a flute.'

'Where did you get your money, friend?' asked Lalu. 'Or did you lie to me when you told me you had a rupee between the two of you?'

'Ha, ha,' Gughi laughed, 'hun hun, hi hi.'

'Look, that howbata brought us money,' Churanji said, pointing to the hooded from which sat opposite.

Lalu had noticed the hooded figure huddled near him. He stared again, but still he was not certain whether his companions were playing a joke on him. He got up, hesitated for a while till the blanket shook suspiciously and then lifted the sheet off the form. The weaver boy emerged, bursting with the mirth he had been trying so hard to restrain, and they all joined in the laughter.

'So you see, my plan worked,' said Churanji excitedly.

'Wait till you get back, my son,' said Ghulam. 'You will get the licking of your life—especially as your father had to pay my fare for coming here, over and above the expense.'

'Never trouble about tomorrow,' Gughi said. 'Let us go to the town and see the fireworks and the illuminations at the temple. We have seen enough of the fair.'

'Not so fast, not so fast,' said Ghulam, affecting a deliberate air. 'What about me? What if I want to see more of the fair?' He was older than Gughi and, conscious of his importance, he liked to bully the juniors.

'But you have seen enough now, big brother,' said Gughi, humouring Ghulam for once, although usually he cheeked him. 'You can have a little fun on the way back.'

'Come then,' said Lalu, and he smoothed his clothes and prepared to go.

They bought a betel leaf each from a stall, where a starchedcapped southerner was treating green pans with a mixture of quick-lime. To celebrate the arrival of Ghulam, and, chewing the juice in the fashionable way, they went on their path.

The late afternoon sun scorched in a frenzy of impatience at the prospect of its impending doom. The waves of sightseers ebbed and flowed more eagerly by the congested stalls. Clanking, cluttering bamboo carts and tongas accumulated at the ends of the road. Stallkeepers bawled more ferociously. Paupers and beggars wailed more shrilly. And quacks, magicians and jugglers strained themselves hoarse.

The boys threaden their way back across the Grand Trunk Road, lingering here and there to have a last look at things, stopping at places even against their will, knowing that they wouldn't be able to get into the temple if they delayed and yet loath to leave this place which thundered with a million tongues, boomed with the dense music of neighing horses and mooing cattle, and flashed into fresh colours like a giant kaleidoscope.

A monstrous roar arose from the racecourse when they were almost on the outskirts of the fair, and they dived into the maidan to have a last glimpse of it.

Lalu lifted Gughi and Ghulam, heaved up Churanji, in order to give them a better view of the course over the heads of the well-to-do peasants and city folk who hedged them in on all sides.

A race of Arab ponies was just finishing on the hard, gravelly soil, two furlongs long, and they heard the yells and screams of horsemen who lashed their mounts past the winning-post with the hysteria of madness. It was difficult to see anything past the shapeless forms that walled out the gaze of curiosity. So they pushed their way back to the road. But they were rewarded by a spectacle more wonderful than they could have hoped for.

From the height of the road, beyond the ditch, they saw a camel race starting. The grudging animals refused to run towards the posts at all. Their riders had only one rops to control them with, and that was tied to the animal's nose. The boys ascended the slant of a rubbish heap and saw, beyond the broad opening of the winning-posts, all five camels obstinately refusing to budge an inch from the starting-line. As their riders pulled the ropes, the camels just turned their heads against their shoulders and suddenly began to run in all directions without any regard for the wishes of their riders, scattering the crowd and creating utter pandemonium. One of the camels refused to move, and when harried, threw himself on the ground like a child in a bad temper and rubbed his nose in the dust.

'That is like Gughi when he is beaten at a game,' said Ghulam.

But before he had finished his sentence, the camel got up and ran to the winning-post at a lumbering canter.

'And now don't tell me that that is Ghulam,' retorted Gughi, and he ran across the ditch, fairly making the sky ring with his laughter.

'To the grain market! To the temple! To the Railway Station! To the grain market! To the Elephant Gate! To the Temple!' the bamboo-cart plyers shouted in an incessant chorus fifty yards away from an enclosure. And as he ran with his note of triumph, Gughi nearly fell into his father's arms.

Contrary to his son's expectations, Jhandu was kinder than he ordinarily was in the village. The spirit of life that was abroad in the fair had apparently caught him, and as he had done a good day's business, he had drunk 'sherbet,' as the other exciting spirit was called, and positi-vely oozed with generosity. He offered to take the lot of them to their destination.

The journey towards the town was somewhat sober, for the boys knew that the end of their day of pleasure was fast approaching. The peasants, too, straggling along the road after enjoying the glory of the fair, looked glum, and the beggarly cries of hideous, roving tramps, mincing along

their way in tattered patched clothes, echoed above the clattering of the carts, like the helpless howls of stray hungry dogs.

On the outskirts of the town, beyond the vast puddles of rain-water and refuse, by the red-brick building of a licensed wine-shop, some drunken peasants were singing aloud in broken accents as they trudged. Others lay with their bodies sprawled in mud, while one lay with his face in a filthy drain.

And in the streets of pleasure through which Jhandu made a short cut to the centre of the town where the temple stood, throngs of well-to-do peasants dressed in their best white homespuns stalked leisurely along, staffs in their hands, making eyes at the cheap whores who sat dressed in their gaudy array of coloured clothes and glittering counterfeit electro-plated ornaments, daubed with greasy, garish powders, paints and chewing betel leaf. And they did not disdain to sprinkle the content of their spittles from their windows down on their admirers in those sharp, pumped-out sprays at which they were adept.

It became almost impossible for the carriage to move through the multitude, beyond the fuel wood market and the bamboo bazaar. So the boys asked Jhandu to drop them there. But he would not stop till he came up against a solid block of humanity at the mouth of the antique bazaar. Then he pulled the reins of his horse, put a rupee in Lalu's hand saying, 'This is for sweets for you all,' and quietly turned round after the boys had alighted. 'Come and meet me at the yekka stand outside Elephant Gate tomorrow afternoon if you want a lift back,' he shouted, and then went his way.

According to Ghulam, they were to meet Amar Singh on top of the steps leading into the shrine a hundred yards away. For Ghulam had met him at the boarding-house where he had gone to seek news of his friends. And they struggled in that direction, heaving, pushing, pulling themselves through the sea of humanity. For a while they were caught up in surging waves and scattered apart. Churanji reached

the steps on a whirling tide which carried him off his feet. Then the door of a house bordering on the temple opened and part of the crowd rushed into it.

Lulu, Ghulam and Gughi took this opportunity and rushed up to the steps where Churanji stood and carried him across. They were in the courtyard of the house next door to the Post Office, panting, puffing, sweating, almost suffocated. But as the vast surges of the outer crowd broke into the compound, they shouldered their way through to a corner of the house and rushed up some broad dark stairs, falling, stumbling and half-dragged back by the others. But their long breaths held out in the struggle and they found themselves on the flat roof after all.

A wonderful panorama revealed itself from the terrace of the house which overlooked the square of the shrine only partially obscured by a banyan. For under the darkening sky, from the niches of the huge monolithic temple which stood in the middle of a tank, connected to the base of a hill by a footbridge, thousands of little earthen saucer lamps illuminated the white clothes and black faces of an amorphous humanity seated on the pavement around the square on the edges on the reservoir in a rippling zigzag, while the pale gold flames of the lights were reflected back as if the water had caught fire.

Exploring for a vantage-point on the top of the Post Office building, Gughi sought out Amar Singh who had kept places for them on a corner of the terrace, through the courtesy of the son of the Post Master who was his class-fellow.

They were wildly excited at embracing a friend who had been a rare visitor to the village for some years. But this excitement was as nothing to the delight of the scene before them. Luckily for them the prayers of the devout were just ending. A gong note resounded from the temple. Then the fireworks were let off from the turrets of the shrine, from the hill and from the holy tower overlooking the lake at the northern end.

From the deep labyrinths of the fast-gathering darkness the artisans who had been preparing for the fete for the

past year threw handfuls of burning dust which leapt like shooting stars to the sky.

Then they ignited sticks of powder and lit the whole arena above the glow of earthen saucer lamps with rockets that flew from end to end.

A few balloons were let loose and held the populace spell-bound as they gathered height, now surely, now precariously, and soared to the distant spaces of the earth, beyond the city of congested roof-tops.

And then a hundred different flowers shaped themselves on the tops of the buildings so that the vast concourse of humanity murmured prayers at the work of God, shouted the call of religion and hissed and sighed with happiness.

From the rapt silence of suspended moments when a rocket shot forth into the air or a bouquet of flowers unfolded in a wheel of fire, the boys cried out excited little shouts, like the wild half-expressed, half-suppressed gestures of primitive men in the face of a new wonder.

Amar Singh had invited them to a feast for the evening. And they shouted themselves hoarse, flung their arms high in the air, skipped and jumped and reached out to the heights of pleasure.

Lalu understood, below the rims of his eyes, the meaning of pilgrimage, as Guru Nanak had recommended it to the devout, once a year.

XI

'ONE can see one's home from afar, but not when there is the guilt of a crime on one's soul.'

As Lalu walked away from the serai where Gughi's father halted his bamboo cart, his guilt of crime loomed larger and larger in his soul with each step he took.

'Each for himself.' Churanji and Ghulam, being one soul in two bodies in this adventure at least, drifted towards the sahukar's house so that they could persuade Churanji's mother to intercede on the boy's behalf when her husband

came home. Gughi was safe enough because, contrary to the rogue's expectations, his father had been generous. Lalu passed towards the village, under the shadow of the lawyer's bungalow, keeping to the edge of the road, lest someone should see him and notice that he had his hair cut and spread the rumour before he reached home and "break the vessel".

Until now he had not left afraid. In the company of the boys he had been so jolly, eating, drinking and sucking sugar cane, so that even the strange feeling he had felt after he had had his hair shorn at the *King George Vth Haircutting and Shaving Saloon* had worn off. He almost felt as if he had always been short-haired.

But now, at the thought of the consequences, he felt a draught on his neck, though he had carefully wrapped the folds of his turban below the line which the barber's razor had defined in the interest of cleanliness.

That was a disadvantage, he thought. He might catch cold. And since, after the expense of the fair, he had not been able to indulge in the luxury of a shampoo, the bits of prickly hair irritated him, or so he fancied. The cotton-wool which the barber had fixed round his neck under the overall did not seen to have kept the prickly bits out of his shirt either and the superficial rub with a towel had certainly not brushed off all the little hairs from his neck. Each time he took his finger to the back of his ears he picked up a few more ends.

'I had such a lot of hair though,' he said to himself, 'and it was bound to happen.'

He could not forget the morning's sensations. His first exhilaration had been blighted by the irritation of clippers tugging at the roots of his hair. The barber had had to resort to all kinds of expedients to cut his thick mop into shape.

And he had felt quite guilty while he was being shorn, filled with disquietude to find himself, a Sikh, in a barber's shop, though luckily there were no other customers.

But he had risen from the chair with a new feeling of lightness, a sense of superiority at the ease and comfort with

which he could run his fingers through his hair in the fashionable manner. He would be able to discard the turban and go about bareheaded with his hair oiled and brushed back.

'I shall soon get used to it,' he told himself yet again, and then he caught his breath in dismay.

There was Fazlu coming towards him from the bazaar, a hookah in his hand. He must be avoided at all costs, for if he saw Lalu the rumour would spread.

Lalu darted across the breadth of the bazaar towards the cobbler's lane, frightening the hens and cocks into cluck-clucking as he slipped on the mouldy soil around the drains. He jumped into a ravine beyond which stood the sweepers' straw huts, winking with distended eyes at the village from which they were segregated by the filthiest, most foully odorous pond in the village, from which the outcasts drew their water and where they and their cattle bathed. The elders among the high castes told the children that it was part of the kingdom of Yama in hell, to which it was connected by a subterranean passage.

The sun had mounted above the greyish-red clouds and the shaggy leaves on the top of the trees in the groves around the wells in the fields beyond were crimson through the light reflected by patches of water in the sewage. Lalu lifted a lapel of his shirt to his nose and ran across the ramparts of dung excreted in the khud by the lazy shopkeepers, who would not venture out into the fields to answer the call of nature. He soon reached the zigzag track which went round the houses of the Muhammadan oilmen and vegetable growers towards the weavers' lane, from which he hoped to make a short cut past Harnam Singh's home into the Haveli.

He had often walked this way as a child, and he recalled how he used to sneak out to go fishing with Bhupa, the sweeper boy, who later on had become a Christian under the influence of Father Annandale and had got a job at a dresser in the Sherkot hospital. Then he hand't minded the smell of this part of the village which was so repulsive to him now. Surely he had not become sniffy like the

elders!

Two cowherd women were coming towards him with cakes of cow-dung piled up in pyramids on their baskets and behind them—who was it? Aunt Uttam Kaur? . . . No!

He glanced around distractedly and then hurried on, capering, tense and frightened, the rustling of his tehmet sounding in his ears like the swish of a gale. At last he was only about twenty feet from the house.

'Why am I so nervous?' he rebuked himself. And he made an effort to relax the muscles of his face into an ordinary, casual expression.

But as he crossed the threshold, he felt the fear of the unpleasantness that would ensue, the ache of apprehension, and a lingering regret that all his assurance could not be dispelled. The air seemed suddenly to grow thin about him as the stale darkness of the hall enveloped him.

He stopped for the briefest moment and lifted his hand to his turban to see that it was still wound tightly round the back of his shingled head to conceal any traces that might give the game away too soon. He felt dizzy and almost stumbled on the plane of light that followed him from the outer door up to the entrance of the courtyard.

'That was stupid,' he murmured, and he wished he had asked Gughi to come with him. They could not abuse him in the presence of an outsider.

As soon as he entered, he saw a stranger whom he recognized as Ramji Das, the barber and match-maker of their brotherhood, seated in a bedstead.

'Come, my son,' his mother called gladly as she saw him enter. 'My son has arrived back at an auspicious moment. Come, my son, congratulations.'

Lalu felt embarrassed, not at her fussing but at the congratulations.

'Oh God,' his soul breathed, 'I hope it is not a match for me.'

'Come, my son, there is great happiness in our home to-day,' his mother continued from the kitchen where she sat with a ceremonial red silk-diapered phulkari on her head and

a basketful of sweets, coco-nuts, almonds, raisins before her, 'Come and have some sweets.'

'Come, child. Come and bow before Raja Ramji Das,' said his father from where he sat telling beads and whispering 'Wah Guru, Wah Guru,' on a stool by the old, white-coated barber of Sherkot, whose well-groomed face with its immaculately kept white beard reflected his prosperity as a go-between. The old man was obviously straining to please Ramji by exalting him to the dignity of Raja—a courtesy title for members of the barber caste.

'Come, Lalu son,' began Ramji with the easy familiarity with which he treated everyone and which had secured him the privilege of being employed as a match-maker even by Sikhs who had no other use for barbers.

Far from shocking his family on his return as he had feared, for the moment Lalu himself was both confused and embarrassed. He hoped that this token of marriage spread before his mother was not for him. It could not be. Yet his mother had congratulated him.

'First water, afterwards mire.' He had cast off one affliction only to be threatened by another, it seemed. But come what might, he resolved, he would not consent. Even if they had accepted the token for his betrothal. He would die rather than marry.

But there was his elder brother, Dayal Singh, seated beside Ramji Das, dressed in clean apparel. That was reassuring, though doubt still trembled in his heated senses. He hung his head and went towards his mother to empty the corner of the sheet in which he had brought some fruit for the family.

'Now come, my son, don't be shy,' called the barber, quick to notice the boy's embarrassment. 'The token is for your brother, though your time will come next. It will not be long before I bring another offer. There are people in Sherkot who used to see you when you were at school, and they are only waiting for their girls to grow up. For what more worthy household is there than this to which the girls of the brotherhood can go? The faces of you boys have the light of the sun.' And after this unctuous flattery,

he looked towards Nihal Singh and Gujri for approval, his eye on the big commission he was expecting for negotiating the suit.

'Yes,' said Gujri, waxing sentimental. 'I will be happy to see a little bride come to our house for my beautiful son, Lal. Dayal Singh will not be a worry to me any more now, but I won't die happy unless my Lal is married and settled.'

'You look after your other sons and leave me to my own devices,' mumbled Lalu, coming towards the barber and accepting the blessing of Ramji's hand on his head.

'The mother of Sharm Singh, give a taste of the shagan to Lalu and sweeten his mouth,' said old Nihal Singh to his wife.

'First let us entertain Raja Ramji Das, mother,' said Sharm Singh, emerging from the barn. 'Give him some fruit and a mathi. The boy's mouth can be sweetened afterwards.'

'My mouth is sweet enough, mother,' said Lalu, mockingly. 'You should sweeten my eldest brother's tongue. It needs to be less bitter, especially on this auspicious occasion.'

Sharm Singh was stung by the reproach and stood staring hard at the boy.

'What is wrong with your head?' he bullied, noticing that the folds of Lalu's turban descended lower than the nape of his neck.

'What has he done?' asked the barber with a smile, for his profession as a go-between had matured in him the qualities of peacemaker between antagonistic families.

'I paid a visit to the *King George Vth Haircutting Saloon* in the town this morning and left the ponderous weight of my head behind on the floor,' answered Lalu with self-conscious bravado, excited by the tension created by his unfortunate exchange of words with his brother.

'Tell me,' he continued, bringing a little bottle of scent he had bought out of the pocket of his shirt, 'is this hair oil, which your colleague sold me for four annas, any use?'

'Ohe,' said Sharm Singh, as everyone glanced around in confusion. 'Don't swagger so! Lift your turban and show us what you have done.' And he advanced towards the boy with a threatening gesture.

'Han, undo the turban,' old Nihal Singh roared as he rushed up to his son, torn between anger and bewilderment.

'Hai! Hai! May God bless you! You haven't really done that, have you?' cried Gujri, hovering uneasily on the threshold.

'I have, mother,' said Lalu shortly. And though he was really feeling even more distressed than his family, he replied to his brother's and father's challenge with a greater hauteur and pulled the turban off his head. There was a gasp of horror, followed by a moment of stunned silence.

Nihal Singh sprang forward and dealt him a resounding slap of the face. With the fury of an old tiger, he fell upon his son, digging his claws into the boy's neck, while Sharm Singh ground his teeth with an, 'Ohe! Swine!' and struck him hard on his head, his neck and on his body.

'Oh, don't, my host, don't,' said Ramji Das, trying to intervene.

'Vay, my son, my son, what have you done?' cried Gujri, as she rushed towards the bedstead. 'On this auspicious day,' and she fell to crying with her hands raised in the air.

'Take the name of Wah Guru. Take the name of Wah Guru,' faltered Dayal Singh as his habitual equanimity disturbed, he rushed up to placate them. 'Lal Singh is young and he has erred. But Wah Guru will claim him back to the faith. Mention the name of Wah Guru.'

Lalu was taken aback by the onslaught even though he had expected it. One part of him longed to struggle. But the feeling of docility and respect that had been inculcated in him since birth made him dumb and unresisting, though he smouldered with rage and self-pity.

'The son of a bitch,' shouted Nihal Singh, pushing off Dayal Singh's restraining hands and, lifting the barber's silver-mounted staff that lay by, he struck the boy hard on

his neck, his back, his legs and his ribs!

'That you should go and disgrace me and my family, drag my name into the dust, spoil the name of our ancestors! Look, people, the darkness has descended upon the world. That one of my sons, my sons, should go and have his kaishas cut!'

'I told you the rogue has been spoilt,' put in Sharm Singh as he gave Lalu a vindictive thump. 'It is your fault for having indulged him. Now reap the harvest you have sown.'

'Hai, hai! How did I know he would do it? My son, my dearest, my most beautiful son. He was so lovely with the kaishas. That he should go and disfigure himself. How did I know?' wailed Gujri from where Kesari sought to console her. 'Oh, all is lost! We are undone! We shall not be able to show our faces in the brotherhood!'

'Be patient, mother, be patient,' soothed Dayal Singh, warm and flushed but still exerting himself to be kind to everyone in the turbulence that this sudden incident had created in his mind.

'What is the matter? What is the matter?' cried Ajit Kaur, the wife of Harnam Singh, as she come running in from her house which backed on to the cattle-shed.

'Nothing is the matter,' urged the barber. 'There is no talk in this. The boy has only had his hair cut.'

'Had his hair cut!' Ajit Kaur exclaimed. 'Oh. The Shame! It is the most shamefullest shame that could be for a Sikh to have a single hair of his body shorn.'

The shrill voice reawakened Lalu's impulse to scream his rebellion, to strike his aggressors. But he heard his father's panting breath as Dayal Singh dragged the old man away, and he lost his will. But he looked up at Sharm Singh whom Ramji held in his grasp with liquid fire in his eyes. If only he could flare up, burst into flaming heat and destroy these people.

But nothing happened. A strange stillness had descended on the family after the violent scene. And Lalu hardly knew what he was feeling. But his heart throbbed with the hurt pride of the confidence that he had done right. He had

obeyed the dictates of his own conscience. In him, and outside him in the world, he felt, as he drew a sobbing breath, he would be victorious, and people would admire him. But here he was defeated.

'Oh, my son, my son.' The voice of his mother fell with a dull thud on his soul with its broken, ugly hysteria. And he felt that he hated her. Then his rage softened for a moment and he wanted to go to comfort her. But the clarion bell of anger rang again in his head, rang insistently and held him in its spell. And he stood dazed in a welter of conflicting emotions.

'Don't upset yourself, mother, don't,' said the barber. 'It won't make any difference to the offer, I assure you. Your hosts are shaven-headed. In fact, if I may be pardoned for saying so, they would rather that Sardar Dayal Singh had no hair on his head and on his face. That was the reason why they have waited so long—to decide whether they should offer the match to a shaven-headed man or to your son. Of course, they were convinced that they couldn't have any worthier match than Dayal Singh, specially as Meli's daughter is to be betrothed now to the son of Duni Chand. But young girls nowadays don't like their husbands to have beards. And Lal Singh probably knows that. Don't you, my son?' The barber friend to relieve the tension.

'Oh, you cannot disgrace us like that,' said Ajit Kaur. 'It is the most terrible insult to our religion of the five k's.'

'You are laughing. Raja Ramji Das,' said Sharm Singh, curbing his anger so that he might not offend the matchmaker, but determined nevertheless to stop the barber from taking his youngest brother's side, and casting aspersions on long hair.

'This son of a bitch has poisoned my old age,' Nihal Singh shouted with a resurgence of his grief. But he restained his urge to rush upon Lalu again, and sat heavily, his eager lined face wrinkled with a terrible frown. He realized that the barber was in his house with an offer of marriage for his son who was too old to attract other suits.

'Take this food to the Raja,' said Gujri to Kesari, returning to her seat in the kitchen and determined to be hospitable in spite of the calamity that had befallen the house.

Lalu got up to go and help intsead, feeling dispirited and broken. Perhaps if he were gentle and submitted to his family's censure for a while, he might persuade them to relent later.

'Don't you touch our food,' burst Sharm Singh. 'You are a dirty, contaminated dog, a pig.'

'I shouldn't take too much notice of what these boys do,' said the barber, realizing that his hosts were very upset and servilely flattering their conventions.

For he knew that, apart from the important position he occupied on that day, as the bearer of an auspicious message, he was a low-caste man, who had no right to question the codes of the high-caste people. And, feeling that the atmosphere was becoming too tense for him to expect much money, and that he could only replenish his coffers with anything that was offered, he continued, 'I will take these gifts away with me, because I must be on my way now.'

The soft whisper of a yellow leaf flying from a tree in the compound stirred Lalu into activity. He could not shake off the weight of the shame of the abuse and the beating that had fallen of his head. But he turned to the barber and said, 'Acha, Raja Ramji Das, I must go and do some work in the fields.'

'Have something to eat first,' his mother said, with tears in her eyes.

He looked steadily towards her, contemplating her with a coldly sincere remorse that was the only feeling he could summon in his enforced calm. Then, bending his head down, he came towards her.

'I will have something, a sweet perhaps.' And drawing near his mother, and hearing her suppressed sobs, he added, 'Don't weep, mother.'

Gujri just moved her head helplessly.

'Sister, don't weep,' consoled Ajit Kaur, coming towards

her. 'Don't weep,' but her words were smothered by the noise of a drum which Hafiz, the village musician, came beating loudly, to congratulate the family on Dayal Singh's betrothal.

Lalu felt lost, cut off from everyone and trapped in his own swirling sensations, choked by the knowledge of the truth in him, but helpless before the wild rage of others and the noisy music that Hafiz was playing. He picked up a shovel, hesitated for a moment, and then drifted towards the cowshed. There was a confusion of noises outside, and he paused, undecided.

'At least wrap your turban on your hair, you rape sister,' shouted Sharm Singh. 'Don't bring disgrace on us before the marriage of Dayal Singh is celebrated.'

Hardit Singh, the tall burly elder son of the landlord, whose big eyes always bulged out of their sockets, advanced into the compound from a clamorous crowd that had gathered in front of the house. And before anyone could interfere, he rushed at Lalu, and, grasping him with outstretched hands, he rubbed a hand covered with griddle soot mixed with oil over the boy's face.

'Hai, hai,' Gujri cried and beat her breasts.

'Vay, may the vessel of your life never float in the sea of existence,' shouted Ajit Kaur. 'How dare you!'

'Ohe, ohe, ohe!' Nihal Singh and Sharm Singh yelled.

But before they had time to advance a step, Arjan Singh, the walrus-moustached priest of the Sikh temple, brought forward a donkey, shouting, 'Look, ohe, people. This rogue has spoiled our religion, disgraced the village! I know why he never came to the birthday ceremony of Guru Nanak. I knew. . . . Teach him a lesson now! It will be a lesson to all the disreputables of the village!'

Lalu knew in a flash what they meant to do. They must have heard the rumour and wanted to disgrace him publicly by taking him with blackened face through the streets of the village seated on a donkey. Under no circumstances should they be able to do so.

His face had already been blackened. The rage of murder possessed him. But something seemed to dam it up within him, and he merely stood and swung his frame as if to shake himself into action.

The grasp of the landlord's son tightened round him.

'Catch him, catch the swine! The rogue! The spoiler of our religion!' The noise dinned in his ears, together with his mother's howls and his father's and his brothers' shouts behind him.

He shook his arms, but they were held tight by two stalwart peasants, Bhagwant Singh and Gurmukh Singh. He kicked with his legs and strained the whole weight of his body to lift the landlord's son across his own back.

But the landlord's son darted back, throwing Nihal and Sharm Singh and Ramji aside and, catching Lalu by the legs, as the boy struggled to find a way back into the hall, he lifted him and put him on the donkey.

'Come and hold him there,' he shouted. 'Come and hold the dog.'

And Bhagwant Singh and Gurmukh Singh, who were fanatical devotees of the Panth and friends of Bhai Arjan Singh the priest, rushed and overpowered Lalu.

Hardit kicked the donkey on the backside and sent it forward among the shouting, bawling, hysterical, blood-thirsty men, women and children who ran ahead into the lane.

'My son! My son!' Gujri wailed as she struggled to go to the rescue. 'Oh, may they die! May nothing remain of them that they have treated my son like that! Eaters of their masters! Oh, my son!'

'Wah, is this any way of treating our boy,' protested the wife of Harnam Singh, trying to push her way through the crowd. 'Where is my husband? That he might help . . . Vay! . . . .' And she rushed off to find him.

'Ohe, let him go! Let him go! Bhaiji, leave him! This is no way of treating us! He has done wrong, but we will make compensation. This is cruelty! This is no way!' Nihalu, Sharm Singh and Dayal Singh bullied, begged, prayed, supplicated and bullied again.

As the donkey stumbled across the threshold into the lane, there were loud peals of laughter and shouts from the crowd.

'Ohe, look at the black face! Ohe! Look at the black face! Ohe, look, ohe, look,' the children cried.

'Yes, look at the lecher! Look at the eater of his masters! He had forgotten all his religion and had no sense of shame left! Why, he used to wink at us as we came through the lane and stare at us as we sat in undress washing clothes by the pond! He had raised his head to the sky!' the women spoke in a chorus.

'Kill him! Kill the brother-in-law! The rogue!' Arjan Singh ground his teeth in fury, and lifted his hands to strike. 'He never had any respect for religion, insulting the Mahant at the monastery. He had raised his head so high!'

The shock of the violence of his family had broken Lalu's resistance. In spite of the desperate waves of anger that rose to his forehead, he found himself submitting to the crowd. For a while the innate respect not only for his elders but for the people he had flouted held him in a prison of shame and disgust.

But as he found himself being led on the donkey through the lane towards the corner of the village bazaar, the horror of never being able to show his face in the world if he were seen by the shopkeepers and the villagers spread like fire through his body.

He wriggled and shook desperately and loosed his right arm from the grasp of Gurmukh Singh. As his persecutors rushed to tighten their hold on him, he struck a blow on the face of the landlord's son and then lashed out blindly against everyone within his reach.

But the priest held him fast as well as Hardit.

With a mighty twist that strained every nerve, he heaved his body to one side and broke the grip of Gurmukh Singh, overturned and fell through the hands of the others into the drain. The donkey had darted ahead, frightened out of its wits. Lalu rolled on the ground and, slipping through the faltering eager hands of his enemies, stood up, dealing blows right and left, forward and backward, and staggered out of the

crowd which was now scattering in panic.

For a moment he stood, facing the wall. On all sides he heard the clamour of the people shouting behind him and the screams of the housewives standing in their doorways. Then he leapt up to the parapet of the well in the lane and crawled from there to the roof of the shrine and along to the vast mud house of Risaldar Fateh Singh, beyond the reach of his adversaries.

'He has spoiled our religion! Insulted our shrine! Catch him, the thief, the rogue!'

The voices redoubled behind him, and a stone struck his ankle. But blind and deaf to the cries, now that he had got a foothold on the wall, he raced across the precarious breadth of crumbling structures from roof to roof, like an ape.

Once he fell across a bedstead into a heap of cowdung cakes that lay drying in the sun and he could still hear the cry, 'Thief, thief,' behind him. But he was far beyond the reach of his tormentors as he jumped a sheer ten feet down into a manure heap at the back of the vegetable gardeners' houses and gained the fields.

He breathed deeply in relief but he could not steady himself. His whole body was trembling.

He turned sharply towards his father's fields and felt the cool air soft and nimble against the quivering warmth of his flesh. The sky was shadowed by dark, overhanging clouds and he half-wondered whether he should return home.

But he hastened his steps, as if impelled by some instinct to walk quickly away, farther and farther away from the village. Yet he could not help glancing back at almost every step to see if someone was not following him.

'What will they do?' he said to himself, and stopped for a moment to gather his thoughts. But his legs seemed to be failing and, fearful of collapse, he went forward.

Then, as the ploughed up land beyond Fazlu's patch shimmered before him like particles of straw on fire, he felt the tears of self-pity welling in his eyes.

'Oh, my mother! Oh, what happened? Why did it have to happen to me?' he moaned under his breath.

'That I was born on this land. . . . That my mother gave birth to me while she worked in the fields . . . that these are my father's fields. . . . I wish I had never been born. . . . I wish I had been born somewhere else, in some city, in some . . . in any place other than this village, he whimpered as his gaze trembled across the vast dusk of the land.

'Oh, I wish I had never been born here if they had to treat me like that! . . . the abuse . . . the shouts . . . the insults and . . . oh, how could they . . . they blackened my face . . . they put me . . . All of them . . . my own people . . .oh, how could they . . . my own father and mother . . . they used to pet me and love me . . . my own brothers . . . that rogue Hardit Singh! . . . and my own mother, who never slept for nights. . . . . Oh! disgraced for ever . . . beaten and bruised . . . .'

And he beat his hands against his brow and strained his neck from side to side, seeking ease from the torment of the agony.

A strange mist was gathering on the ploughed up fields, and the broad vistas of heaven and earth were closing in around him, hindering his vision from reaching up to the hills and ravines beyond the meadows on which the cattle grazed. He groped his way forward, halting, faltering, struggling like a blind man, feeling shut in, dead, as if effaced for ever.

But before he had gone very far, the sombre, dark sky descended upon him with a swift autumn rain. It swooped down, cold and sharp like the arrows of a scourge that was going to wash him, and the land, out of existence. A piercing wind tossed him to and fro across the slippery edges of the fields and sheet upon sheet of water lashed him, soaked him, drenched him to the skin. Were the heavens also visiting their wrath on him for having had his hair cut, he wondered? Was God in heaven taking his revenge?

Above chasms of whitening emptiness, ugly black clouds poured down a mighty avalanche of water, beating upon the earth, the vegetation and the solitary wondered with a merciless patter. There was a terrific explosion—a vast

pitcher broke upon the head of the world. And he felt as if the vessel of all life had been smashed by an angry God.

But as he swayed and struggled grimly forward, a burst of lightning leapt like a tongue of fire, licking the edge of the village and flew back across the horizon, unfolding a radiant vision of a cluster of stark trees over his father's well.

He was not far from the grove. He could go and take shelter there. The lightning had surely fallen on his enemies in the village and blasted them for torturing him. God had surely taken his revenge on them, and the sky was weeping bitter tears for him. They would learn their lesson from the anger of the Almighty. And surely God had been kind to him to show him the way to the trees.

Inside him he knew they were foolish thoughts, and yet they seemed to console him. The folk in the village were bound to see a terrible meaning in this sudden downpour.

And he pushed forward through the gathering darkness, lashed by blasts of wind and rain. The trees were swaying in the gloom like white-clad ghosts, silent and grim among the rustlings, the whistlings and the whisperings of the elements.

The ditches were overflowing with bubbling streams. The furrows of sodden black fields were teeming with foam-flecked water. The crumpled, dead leaves of trees were floating about and the early shoots of wheat lay swollen on their sides.

And as the fury of the rain abated, behind him in the village the jets of newly lit lamps flickered, while a few peasants shouted to each other as they set out weeding, with hoes in their hands.

XII

LALU walked behind the wooden plough, goading the oxen with his right hand. Occasionally he pushed them, whistled to them or urged them on by smacking his tongue against

his palate. Both Thiba and Rondu seemed to realize that their master was kind to them. For they kept up a steady trot, except now and then when they took the angles and forgot that they were supposed to maintain their speed. Their eyes were blinkered and they could not see how much of the field remained to be ploughed. But they were quite willing to work as they could sense that the hand at the back of their bodies was that of the master who fed them.

And indeed Lalu was not a hard taskmaster. In his childhood he had twisted the beasts' tails, abused them and even flogged them, but that was mainly because he was mischievous and had wanted to imitate the elders. And the responsibility of feeding them, watering and washing them had helped to mature him.

The oxen shivered with pleasure every time he touched them, licked his arms with their long tongues as he prepared the fodder and always looked at him with widely dilated, big, glassy eyes as much as to ask, 'What are you thinking, brother?'

Did they know the difference between his eldest brother's temperament and Dayal Singh's and his own? Lalu wondered. They rurely must, for they were so obstinate with Sharm Singh, if he asked them to move even an inch in the cattle-shed so that he could sweep up their dung. Yet they rubbed their wet noses against Dayal Singh and himself with such a simple, affectionate gesture

The old man did not have much to do with them now. He yoked them to the wheels of the well now and then, and sometimes flogged them hard and sometimes petted them with endearing words.

In his childhood, Lalu had always copied his father. He could see himself sitting on the rough seat at the end of the wooden shaft with a branch of a tree in his hand, while the oxen went round slowly. And he was beating them as he shouted, 'Go, go fast. May you die! May I wear shoes made of your hide, beasts, sons of scavengers!'

Their hind legs were covered with dung on which swarms of big flies and little flies were gethering. And he was flaying them hard, harder, and then talking to them

in sweet, silly, loving phrases, then again hitting them hard, till a disgusting streak of blood had trickled from Thiba's haunches and mingled with the dung, attracting more flies.

He had felt nauseated and had run away frightened.

'But I never meant to do it,' he mumbled.

He took a long stride, pressed his feet deeper into the earth and stared vacantly at the bullocks. Then he turned his head aside to evade the memory that had come into his eyes, and muttered caressingly to the beasts in the familiar manner of the elders, 'Come on, my children, come on, my treasures.'

But the picture of Thiba's hind legs persisted, bespattered not with dung and streaks of blood but with clots of blood and sores on which the insects congregated, though Thiba was whisking his tail to scatter the flies, while Rondu struggled to lick his sides.

He shook his head and looked aside till the picture was blotted out of his mind, deluged in the emptiness of the dark brown, ploughed fields, which lay still in the transparent air of a clear blue sky. The pale sunlight had lost the refreshing tang of the bracing autumn, and bit his uncovered flesh in which life throbbed with fainter pulsations.

It was curious that they obeyed. But from the way they hurried every time they scented the goad, he could see that they had been flogged into perfect obedience, into accepting the slightest wish of their masters. But he too had been flogged into obedience. That was why.

Han. They had begun to break his will in his childhood. Every time he had done anything, his father had abused him or slapped his face. And then the frequent use of the rod on him by the schoolmasters had broken down his power of resistance. And the feeling of respect to the wishes of the elders which his mother had inculcated in him had made him incapable of hitting back. And so, that day . . .

He flushed red at the thought that he had accepted the blows they had dealt him. If it had not been for that submission, he would not have been so cowed down when

the villagers came. And he would have broken the skull of Hardit, who blackened his face, and routed all the others who had put him on the donkey.

The oxen slowed a little and he casually pushed them forward again with a cluck-cluck of his tongue. The plough faced the sun which was soaring towards the yellow highway of the hills in the distance, across the bare trees which clustered like spider webs at little distances on the damp upturned earth, across the vegetable patches, the still ponds and the stiller ravines, mottled by green turf. He pressed the ploughshare deeper into the earth and walked along calmly, as if he were another self looking at his own soul.

He tried to lift himself from his obsession and sniffed at the cold air. The land was bound in a tense silence. A wreath of rose-tinted mist hovered over the distant fields where the railway train passed beyond Nandpur, while spirals of heavy, grey smoke hung over the village houses, muffling men's voices and muzzling the cattle which chewed the cud and wandered with slothful steps over the scanty grass of yellow pastures. Not even a dove cooed. Only an occasional crow cawed as it fled close to the ground. It seemed that winter was freezing everything. Even his pain and suffering seemed remote and detached.

In the summer, the corn was waving and the grass stirred with a rustling breeze. And in the warm exhalations of sweets smelling greenery, of cool water, when the air rustled through the trees on the wall, he had lain on his cot and lost himself in the prospects he had always built of the harvests he would himself sow and reap when he grew up. Or he had wandered miles and miles in search of nests, chased rabbits or deer, and returned home, sometimes feigning a sadness just to perplex his mother.

Later he had been happier. For he had begun to grow up and had learnt to be alone with himself. He had discovered new things at school and in the town. Then he had believed that there were few things in life not known to him. For he had soon realized that he could put two and two together better than anyone,—could calculate the advantages and disadvantages that would accrue to him if

he did this or that. Why, 'He could go and sell the whole lot of us,' they used to say, with envious approbation. Only inside him, he could not tackle his own Fate.

But the nagging of the elders had always tormented him. They were constantly laying down the law. "If speech be one rupee, silence is two." "You'll grow wiser as you grow older." Always the same old cliches to check his impulsive utterances.

And now it seemed worse then ever.

'Oh, God, if only I could run away,' he muttered under his breath. But he knew there was no way of escape. He had no money, and if he had had his hair cut with full faith in the rightness of his act, how could he be a coward?

He looked up from the furrows which his plough was carving to the hills, gleaming bright and bare below the haze of cottonwool clouds that floated across the blue sky. The dark specks of a few cattle grazing on the sloping pastures reminded him that Gughi would be there. The boy had recently got a job helping the cowherds take the beasts to graze farther afield, because all the land under fodder near the village was being ploughed for the winter harvest.

'But I can't tell him,' he muttered. 'He doesn't understand.'

And he retraced his gaze across the fine stretches of land and looked deep at the shoots of maize and wheat, the first evasive gleams of green that would soon become yellow, gold and ripe brown. There was not a soul within sight.

He took the curve at the edge of the field and hurried Thiba and Rondu with a fierce push, inspired by the will to forget himself in his work. But his thoughts returned and he was torn and lacerated—full of a bitter hatred for the world.

'They are cowards, all of them,' he cried out, 'and their own dreary lives have burnt them up into dry cinders. They have no life left, no hope, no strength. They are ugly, with their short-breathed, coughing, spitting, dribbling, sweating, bearded faces, and they want to make everyone ugly like themselves. And they are hypocrites. They are not half of them as good as they pretend to be—wrinkled old swine

who cursed and reviled me. And those women, with their shameless abuse, filthy like the men who oppressed them.'

But how he had suffered! Would he ever recover from the degradation?

He had lain in the pitch darkness of the night, digging his firts into his head to stifle the confused incoherence of his thoughts, to crush out the ache that throbbed there with the insistence and monotonous beat of a drum. But the claws of his anguish only broke the shell of one thought or feeling to release a hundred others, till in the half-crazed torpor of a first sleep, he had seen serpents writhing across his body, grisly and horrible, as his long hair had seemed in his dreams before he had had it cut. And he saw himself as a hideous hydra, frightened and frightening; as a devil, a madman, a diseased, leprous, verminous man, clothed in rags, like the mother of dogs—a disgusting spectacle, at whom the villagers were casting the foulest curses, imprecations and stones. And he was alternately trying to hide into himself and running for safety behind the corners of strange mud houses, scattered about on the hills.

And he had seen himself in a nightmare exposed to the swarming mob, which was chasing him out of the alleys. He had stood, guarding his head from the stones with uplifted arm. His shouts had frightened them off for a while and he had thought he was saved.

But the mob had rallied and charged with redoubled vigour till he had felt that the whole air was filled with his enemies who had turned into locusts and were soaring towards him, as he stood among the waving corn on the land.

Recoiling in rage against their cruelty, red-eyed and terrible, he had planted his feet on the earth and stood, the hulking frame of his body waving like a tree in a storm.

But the locusts came swarming. And he had set fire to himself and the fields. Hundreds of his enemies had been burnt to death and the rest had scattered in confusion. And he had wandered alone for a while till Gughi, Churanji, Gopal and Sheikhu had suddenly appeared and, lifting him

on their shoulders, had thrown him into the canal, to extinguish the flames that leapt up from his head. And he had emerged laughing.

And then, in the impalpable, intangible perfume of a sweating warmth, he had found himself reaching out to the radiant image of a girl. She wore a tussore dress with a pink scarf on her head. And she was surrounded with the air of luxury which the angrezi women in the cantonment of Sherkot had about them. And she was walking, running on a dusty road through the blazing sunlight, with her shoes resting on her head, her wheat-coloured face sweating, her nostrils dilating with short gasps of breath, as she seemed frightened of crossing the bridge over the canal. And he, who had sat smoking by the Power House, had laughed suddenly and shouted to her not to be afraid. He had offered to take her across on the back of the Sahib's motor-cycle, which he knew how to use.

But she had turned her face away from him with a babyish pout and had run away with an injured innocence, saying, 'Tease your mother, tease your sister, rogue. Why do you want to annoy me?'

He had sat back, hurt, embarrassed and bewildered. He had wept, telling himself that he hadn't meant to hurt her. And he had felt that he was defamed for ever, that he was an outcast, and that the only thing he could do was to go and put his bleeding heart before her and beg her, beg her and change her with his appeals. And if she didn't melt, then he would beat her, mangle her body, destroy her.

He kicked the sod of the dark, moist furrows and looked round to see how much of the field he had ploughed. But his gaze turned inwards and strained to probe the depth of his dreams, in the dense gloom of his head.

He urged the bullocks on with another cluck-cluck of his tongue, and walked along, his head bowed in thought, his heart torn with restlessness.

He felt that his hours of anguish had made him grow older—older and wider and larger, with a largeness within him.

He must try and be reasonable, understand their limita-

tions, see the whole thing in proportion. He could laugh at everybody and himself, for he was convinced that he was right.

For what was life? What did it mean? he asked himself, tossing his head so that the wind rustled through his shorn locks. What was it, if it didn't mean that one could enjoy oneself, be happy, since in the end one had to die? To be sure it was not all play, and one had to work. But why the pain?

'I like work,' he thought. 'It is a game of the left hand. And if they will only love me more, and let me love them, I could soon work off their debts and relieve them of their troubles. And I could deal with the landlord's family, too, and show up the filthy life of the Mahant and. . . .

His soul swelled with adolescent exuberance and he felt that his battles were half won.

But what was the use? The evil thought stabbed him. They all hated him. And if you couldn't do such a little thing as have your hair cut without being abused and beaten and insulted by the village, how could you do anything that went against their other superstitions? How could one be free, to do what one liked?

He shook his head despairingly and felt the fiery gleam of his frenzy burnt out and extinguished for the while.

And he went forward, dazed with the weight of his own perplexity, breathing evenly in the sunny stillness of the fields where the breeze was turning colder and colder with the damp odour of the newly turned earth, and where the transparent light of the sun shimmered through the elements and sighed among the blades of grass.

XIII

'COME, child, Lal Singha—go with your father and brother to the shop of the sahukar,' Gujri called to Lalu a few days later, as he was busy mixing straw with grain for the cattle in the courtyard. And then she hesitated a little

and looked apprehensively towards him, afraid that he might refuse. And modulating her voice to reveal the quivering hurt that she had felt for him since he had detached himself more and more from the family, she added, 'They are going to arrange a loan for the marriage of your brother, and the rent. . . .' And she paused again, fearful that he might be angry at the mention of the loan, and then smiled. 'You are a friend of Churanji. If you go, that Chamuna'—she continued, twisting the money-lender's real name half-maliciously, as people usually did—'will probably help us.'

'Acha, mother,' Lalu said, relaxing the tense expression he had begun to assume nowadays, when he was at home. 'Acha, where are Bapu and Sharm Singh?'

And he looked round the courtyard as if to see if they were waiting. Then, lifting his eyes, which had been downcast since his shame, to his mother's, he laughed. ' "When the unfortunate farm, their oxen die, the famine comes and fleas abound", ' he recited with forced jocularity.

'After all, child, I have to get brides for you both one day,' said Gujri evasively. 'The sooner you two are married the better.'

'Acha mother, if that will please you,' Lalu said, abandoning the stubborn resistance of days of bitterness. Now was the time to dissolve his differences with the family, he thought. It was difficult to live always in complete isolation, like a pariah. For though he could turn in upon himself and shut himself in his own thoughts against anybody, his whole being ached for contact.

' "One coal does not burn well alone, and the road seems long to the lonely traveller", ' He quoted the proverb to himself. And he liked to be natural, to live in and through his family, even though they had tortured and humiliated him.

'Acha, mother,' he repeated, 'you come and give this to the beasts. It is nearly done. And I will get ready to go.'

'Childling.' Gujri said pouring some maize flour into an earthen pot full of steaming spinach which she had

cooked. And as she stirred the contents with the ladle, she said, pouting her lips : 'To-day I will give my beautiful son lots of butter. My poor son looks pale and only half himself.'

'Will there be maize flour bread too?' Lalu asked, affecting the greedy manner of his childhood. And he laughed to overcome the pride of his recent reticence and walked away from the cattle-shed feeling a new strength in his bones, a new power in his soul, that seemed to have come from his mother's words. He felt a return of the old boyhood exuberance that had made him go jumping for joy, that had even made him deliberately seek to exert himself, hack at the roots of a shady neem tree and fell it violently, wantonly, just to show off to the boys. It was so refreshing to be able once again to go about freely, without shame or timidity.

'Now I wonder where that affliction Kesari is,' said Gujri. 'I sent her with offerings to the monastery half a day ago and she has not returned yet. If she were here she could have looked after the kitchen while I attend to the beasts.'

And then she sat absorbed in herself for a moment, her eyes fixed, her lips moving in noiseless musings.

Lalu did not answer. He had always felt that his mother treated Kesari with a diabolical hatred, unrelieved by any tenderness. Yet he couldn't hurt her by making excuses for his sister-in-law, especially as, however much he liked Kesari for the gaiety that she displayed in spite of her mother-in-law's iron discipline and her husband's foul temper, he did not like the rumours that were beginning to be current about her. He had heard that she sat shamelessly naked at the pond when she went to wash clothes there, and wore transparent gauzes on her head through which she could be seen by all and sundry, and that she even smiled at strangers. And what would his friends say if—perhaps his mother was right. She was wise and good and very affectionate, and sometimes he had seen her and Kesari very happy together, sewing, or spinning as his sister-in-law had lately learnt to do. Indeed, the old woman was kind to

the girl so long as Kesari was not lazy and did not indulge in city habits. Only like all Indian mothers she wanted the sons to be spiritual husbands.

And his mother could be generous. She had a great soul. How she accommodated herself to everyone and everything, in spite of her iron will! How she bent that iron will to the service of others, day and night, without any gain for herself. For she desired neither clothes nor delicacies of any kind. She was satisfied so long as she could provide these for others.

Or was he being partial to her? But she loved him. And she really had wonderful things in her. Though she was simple and uneducated, she was deep in her understanding. She was narrow at times, but see melted easily. Whatever she was, however she was, stupid, old, difficult, kind, hard, chaotic, disciplined, dreamy—she was his mothers, the best of mothers, the mother who had hurt him and then soothed him, whom he loved and who loved him.

For how casually she had reconciled him now, without embarrassing him, just with a kind word. None of the others had done that, save Kesari, who had joked with him once or twice. But her husband had found some pretext for abusing her if he saw her being too frivolous with him. So his mother alone had borne the brunt of his misery—she, and the elements among which he had worked and lost himself, the rain which had wept for him when he was humiliated, the air which soothed him as he walked in the wilds, and the land, the land on which he had worked ceaselessly for days.

He stirred the fodder with a final rub and then wiped his hands on the sides of the barrel so as so cleanse them. As he unbent his back he saw his father and Sharm Singh emerging from the big barn in which they had been closeted together.

'Go then, son,' his mother called.

'Acha,' he said.

But as he began to wash his hands in the bucket of water that lay by his side, aware of the presence of his

elders in the courtyard, he felt strained and tense again. For not only had they made no overture to him yet, but he felt that "to go a-borrowing was to go a-sorrowing". And, though he had promised his mother he would go with them, he now felt that he wanted to be out of the whole business. They would surely have to mortgage some land or jewellery and what little they had left would go as interest to the sahukar's pocket. ' "One does and all suffer", ' he mumbled to himself.

But he could not object now. He would only infuriate them the more after having 'spoilt the izzat of the family'. It was best to submit.

'Look at this letter,' said the old man, handing him a scroll. 'It is the notus for the revenue, isn't it?' He was mumbling eternal prayers to the great Dispenser of light and warmth, though his teeth chattered with the cold. And, somehow, he looked pathetic as he stood bent and expectant to know the meaning of the words on the paper.

Lalu wiped his hands on his tehmet and took the rough printed form on which the name of his father, the details of the land and the amount of revenue were filled in. He stared hard at the paper so as to get the whole content of its meaning beyond the bare facts printed and written on the sheet in the uneven flourish of the Urdu script. His heart thumped out of respect for his father. A thrid of the earnings of the family for the year were to be paid as revenue to the Sarkar.

'It is the notus all right,' said Lalu, handing back the form. And he looked away to the still courtyard where neither the lowing of the cattle nor the shouts of Jitu, nor the chirruping of the brids who rested by the granary could be heard to alleviate the tenseness of the occasion.

'If we borrow enough to pay off this rent, mother,' said Sharm Singh, 'I am sure Dayal Singh will fetch the sum we need for his marriage from Ishri's husband. I told him not to come back with less than five hundred. For it our sister can't help us in this time of trouble, why is she always bragging to the brotherhood that we live on her husband's money?'

'It is a disgrace to ask our son-in-law for money,' said Gujri. 'We must accept whatever he gives us and not press him. And as we are demeaning ourselves by going to the sahukar, let us get as much as we can to suffice both for the rent and the marriage. I will give you all the trinkets I have left to pawn. But we must celebrate the marriage in a way that impresses the brotherhood and brings an offer for my Lal. After all, there is no harm in taking what is one's own, but it is wicked to give what is another's.'

'Let us go then and see to the rent as well as the marriage,' said Lalu sardonically, emphasizing his last words in a half-mocking, half-serious manner.

'Wait, wait, my son,' Gujri cried. 'I will go to the well and meet you with a pitcher of water on my head so that your visit may be auspicious.'

' "God suits the burden to the strength". ' said Lalu cryptically, and headed towards the door.

'Wait, wait, my son,' Gujri cried out impatiently.

But luckily Kesari was just entering with a brass jug full of Ganges water which was given to devotees at the monastery.

'Acha, now you can go,' Gujri said.

Lalu stood near the hall, waiting for his father and Sharm Singh to issue forth. He cast a glance at his mother who was mumbling prayers as the two men passed ahead, laughed and followed the elders submissively.

XIV

A CRIMSON dusk was wringing the lustre of the world from the western rim of the sky and the village huddled together in the cold winter, dark like a crowd of helpless women bereft of their ornaments.

Weary peasants with shaggy beards and tangled hair murmured the thousand names of God as they traversed the irregular gullies, shrinking from the blasts of a howling winter wind, or sat wrapped up in blankets in the caver-

nous shops of the bazaar, staring stonily ahead and greeting each other in slow whispers or hoarse, heavy voices. Only the shopkeepers were agile as they lit hurricane lamps and candle jets to illuminate the path of Lakshami, the Goddess of Wealth, across the platform of the shops and the thresholds.

'Come, Baba Nihalu, come Baba,' welcomed Seth Chaman Lal from where he sat snuggling warmly in the embrace of a milk-white woollen shawl. 'Come, come, Sharm Singha, come. I hear auspicious news. Congratulations.' And he gathered his shawl round him, pretending to make room for the guests, but really seeking to protect it from being soiled.

Lalu knew that the sahukar had deliberately ignored him, but he accepted the situation and crawled up the two steps to the shop behind his father and brother.

Old Nihal and Sharm Singh took their seats on the board quietly. They were too frightened in anticipation of the hard bargaining they would have to do to acknowledge the effusive congratulations.

'Come, child, Lal Singha,' said the Seth, quick to notice the restraint of the two elders and shifting his ground cunningly in the belief that they resented his coldness to the young man. 'Sat Sri Akal.'

Lalu joined his hands and solemnly sat down on the further edge of the platform, contemplating both the gold-work shoes of the sahukar which lay by the passage and the Sikh greeting Sat Sri Akal that Chaman Lal so graciously offered him in place of the abuse he usually showered on Lalu's head, believing him to be a bad influence on his son.

'Go, ohe, Churanji, go! Where are you?' shouted Chamuna, knowing that his son was nowhere within reach. 'Go and get some sweets for Baba Nihalu and your brothers. Go and get some sherbet!' with a flourish of his fleshy hand he turned to his guests. 'Will you have sherbet or milk?'

'Don't trouble, brother, don't trouble,' said the old man with a kindly light in his eyes.

'It is your food and water we eat and drink every day,' put in Sharm Singh with the exaggerated politeness of

convention.

'No, no,' said the sahukar. 'Do take something, some pinian which the mother of Churanji has made. Churanji can go and fetch them from home. The rogue ought to do some useful service for his elders for once. I don't know where he is loafing about. These boys. . . .'

'No, let him rest wherever he is,' said Nihalu. 'We had some food when we came back from the fields. It is getting chilly in the fields, you know, and I am beginning to feel increasing pain in my spine. So your aunt boiled some leaves of the Kangra tea for me, by the grace of Wah Guru.'

'That earthquake that happened at Kangra was terrible, wasn't it, Baba?' the Seth began.

In order to create the necessary atmosphere for the conduct of business, it was part of his technique to involve his clients in talk of all kinds, to hold them tightly in the invisible grasp of polite conversation and thus catch them in the net of a pervasive goodwill. In this atmosphere he could persuade the dullwitted, kindly peasants to say it was night when it was day and day when it was night. This method was subtle because there was no danger of any nastiness or unpleasantness arising between him and his clients. He had figured it out in his mind that he was to live in this village surrounded by the dourest and most ruthless peasant stock in the Punjab, people who were not averse to chopping off a man's head if there was a quarrel, even over a trickle of water from a canal. So with an inborn cunning not far removed from genius, he had perfected the craft of robbing his clients in an aura of laughter.

'Han, that earthquake,' said Nihalu. 'I remember it so well. May Wah Guru forgive our sins! It was at the time of some trouble which the ferungis were raising in Bengal. It was surely the greatest warning we have had of the beginning of the iron age.'

'It was a long time ago, Bapu,' said Lal Singh, hoping to dismiss the irrelevant topic and bring the conversation to the realities of the business which he knew was going to be difficult.

'You were only a child then,' the old man replied unheeding.

And he was starting off to gather the threads of reminiscence when the sahukar asked : 'When is the marriage then?'

He had sensed that the inessential talk he had started might not only bring about tension between the old man and his son, but take the subsequent conversation too far off the track. He had guessed the reason for this call of the joint family. But still did not want to talk of money too abruptly.

'We have arranged,' said Nihalu, coughing a little and spitting the phlegm on the muddy road beyond the board on which he was sitting, 'we have arranged to have it as soon as possible. The parents of the bride think that the girl is growing up and is a great responsibility on their hands. And I don't expect to live very long myself. The astrologer hasn't recommended an auspicious month yet, though we have asked him to find a date in the spring when the new harvest will be in. Meanwhile he will start making arrangements from now on and set the music on as soon as the cold weather departs and the spring season comes, so that the women folk can sit on the housetops with the dholki. But we have come. . . .'

The old man could not finish the sentence, and, lifting his head, he smiled an embarrassed smile. He was congenitally incapable of coping with the facts of a bargain or any talk of money.

'But we have come to you in the hour of our need,' ventured Sharm Singh.

'I am at your service,' said the Seth. 'Of course. Come on my head, come on my brow,' he continued, working up an artificial warmth and enthusiasm to fill the awkward moment of hesitation and capitulation. And he proceeded to spread the web of further courtesies around the business.

'I shall most willingly help in selecting any silk cloths that you might want to choose either here or in Manabad. Also the gold threads and the brocades. And I know the expert tailors in the city. That Mirza, our village tailor,

with his old machine, can only do the rough work. We can call them here or Sharm Singh can come with me and instruct them in town.

'And of course, the mother of Churanji will be only too willing to help with any advice aunt Gujri might need in selecting the foodstuffs and jewellery. I don't mean to say that aunt can't manage it alone, as she has already celebrated the marriage of three daughters and a son, and Kesari surely knows all that there is to know about the tastes of town girls. But the mother of Churanji having been born and bred in a lane of Lahore has the customs and conventions of the city in her blood, besides being conversant with all the latest fashions.

'We too have been thinking that it is not wise to delay the marriages of our sons nowadays, lest they turn loafers and scoundrels and spoil the prestige of the family. And we are going to celebrate Churanji's wedding soon. You know he is betrothed to the grand-daughter of Lalla Mool Chand Gupta, who owns the cloth market in Manabad. You must really get Dayal Singh's marriage over by then, for you are to come to Churanji's marriage party. . . .'

'You are truly kind and gracious to us and I don't know how we shall ever be able to repay the debt of gratitude that we owe you,' said Nihalu, returning courtesy for courtesy, which provoked Lalu to mutter under his breath, 'Never.' And the old man added : 'I have already asked the mother of Lalu to consult the mother of Churanji, and my daughters will be coming now and then to advise her. But it is not about the marriage I have come to you. . . . I don't know how to tell you this. I feel ashamed to talk. . . .'

'Seth Chaman Lal,' interposed Sharm Singh, 'there has been a lack of money this season. The prices, as you know, have been falling during the year, and last year's harvest was spoilt by the pest and through the drought.'

'This is difficult talk' said the Seth, resting back upon a greasy cushion, lifting his leg and letting loose a huge bombshell of noise. Then he looked around as if for approbation for the remarkable fusillade he had discharged lowered his eyes to look at the sweat which covered his navel, ruffled

his loin-cloth with his hand and continued : 'The farmers haven't done badly so far as I am concerned, though I didn't pay record prices for the grain I bought, because most of it was given me in lieu of debts. Nevertheless there may be something in what you say. . . .' He paused, then began again.

'But it is becoming more and more difficult for me to recover even the interest on what I have lent, to say nothing of the capital. "The crop-ear flies when the flour is spent." I know the debtors are pressed. But you will agree that it is hard on me, because I have lent nearly all the money I had, and have very few securities for the return of the cash except a few tumbledown huts. . . .'

Again he was silent for dramatic effect and, looking round for approval said, 'The Sarkar has made it increasingly difficult for us folk by passing that law by which the money-lender can't even attach the debtor's property. We can't even acquire the mortgage of the peasant's land.' Now he lowered his voice to a whisper.

'Isn't it unfair, that traitorous sycophant Harbans Singh can forfeit the land of any peasant who hasn't paid up his rent and buy off the plots which people mortgage to him? But I—I am debarred from doing so just because I happen to be a bania by caste! I have to stand with loins girded now and show that I can fight as well as anyone. Look, such cruelty has been perpetrated! In the old days I had at least the guarantee of a plot of land. But now I have no surety, nothing, nothing. The silver jewellery of the peasants is worthless, and gold becomes impure when it is used for ornaments, because it is alloyed by that clever goldsmith Bhola Nath, who would put dust into the eyes of the most sharpsighted hawk.

'And, you know, the little capital I have is bound up in this shop. As you must realize, it costs money even to buy such stock as simple printed cottons, spices, oils, salt.'

Lalu glowed with a dull rage at the sight of the polished visage of the glib-tongued sahukar. If this man had called Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh a traitorous sycophant, he himself was no paragon of virtue and comeliness,

the fat rhinoceros!

'Brother Chaman Lal,' said old Nihalu, angered by the reference to the alloy in the jewellery, 'you need not tell me that the ornaments I have pledged to you year after year are not the purest gold that could be found in the Sikh Raj. The necklace of forty big beads and the two small rows of ashrafies came from the neck of Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself. And it was the most cursed day of my life when I took them out of the house, for they were a sacred trust from my father, who served in the household of the Maharaja. But I know they are in safe keeping with you. And that I have paid interest on them regularly, you know from your books. I want my sons to have this family jewellery when we can pay off the debt. This time I have brought you no pledge, because we will need any jewellery we have left for the marriage. And, in fact, we shall be bounden if you lend us the trinkets you have from our house for the days when Dayal Singh rides the bridal horse. We must show something to our enemies here and our relations in town. Otherwise they will say that Nihalu has pawned everything and Lalu will never be married. But as for a security, don't think I don't appreciate your difficulties. I didn't sell the cotton crop or the wheat and the millet when I went to the market some months ago. You can have the millet if you insist on depriving me and my family of the only thing we have to eat till the wheat crop ripens.'

And he stopped short, overwhelmed by a flood of self-pity at the dangerous offer he had made in his proud determination not to borrow without a pledge.

'But give us two hundred rupees to pay off the arrears of rent and some incidental expenses,' put in Sharm Singh.

'It is a difficult business,' said the Seth, screwing his round face, shifting on his seat. 'If as you tell me the prices are falling, I shall not be able to get anything for the millet and maize that you are offering as a guarantee for the loan.'

'But it is only for a little while,' said Sharm Singh. 'We will let you save the money at the end of the next harvest or perhaps even earlier if Dayal Singh brings five hundred

from the husband of Ishri whom he has gone to see at Peshawar.'

'And you need not sell the crop at all, brother,' pleaded the old man, who always hated to see his good corn, the corn he had sowed and reaped with love, sold for petty cash. 'I only offered it to you as a token of my good faith : otherwise we could have come to ask you for the two hundred rupees loan on ordinary interest. That crop is dear to me. "Sugar-cane and mustard are useful when crushed, and grain can always be ground".'

'What can I say to you in answer?' said Chaman, affecting an innocent kindliness which was belied by the smile of self-satisfaction that twisted his lips into a diabolical grin. 'I know that if I tramp in a sugar-cane field I might meet a snake. I am afraid. And I am ashamed. Mine is a very difficult position. I have to oblige people, for if I don't oblige them, I get a bad name and am called a miser, a sweeper, a worm. And yet I have often to forfeit my money. The other day Vasakha Singh of the village of Tanamana owed me a hundred rupees, and fifty more which he borrowed in grain for sowing seed. There was fifty rupees interest on this sum and twenty rupees for expenses. So the total sum he owed me was two hundred and twenty rupees. What do you think he did? He said he had no money to pay back and offered me an old bullock worth some twenty rupees and a mare worth fifty in full settlement of the account. Of course, I have to take proceedings against him and get a decree.'

'We peasants don't count in terms of money, brother,' said Nihalu. 'So you must not be hard on that man. You should ask him for some more tokens. He will surely give you something else. For we folk have to count in terms of buffaloes, bullocks, cows, land and harvests. He must be hard pressed as we are all passing through difficult times. I shall soon die of anxiety if some miracle doesn't happen to relieve my lot. That suit has not yet been decided. And of course, this marriage must be celebrated, because we have the prestige of the family to keep up. And Dayal Singh is getting old. But I say to myself, "Which

is best, to eat mangoes, or count the trees"? So be kind, and help us.'

'We have to raise the rent in a hurry, Shahji,' said Sharm Singh to come to the point. 'Otherwise we wouldn't be so importunate as to come to you.'

'I am your servant,' said the Seth, mingling humility with a subtle aggression. 'But,' he continued, 'it is a very risky business.'

'There is hardly any risk left, uncle,' said Lalu bitterly, unable to listen patiently any longer to the bland assurances and insincere sentiments of the sahukar.

'I have to beware of the door which has several keys,' burst the Seth. 'Of course there is a risk. Your Bapu has just been saying that he didn't sell out because prices were falling.'

'But we don't want you to sell the grain,' Lalu said directly.

'What guarantee have I left for the return of the money then?' asked the Seth curtly. 'Tell me, you who are so clever, did you ever read in your books of a loan without some kind of surety?'

'The interest you are charging,' Lalu remarked.

'A pice in a rupee!' the Seth snarled, opening his mouth wide as if he were going to put his teeth into the boy. 'Is that any surety for a loan?'

'That is eighteen and three-quarters per cent,' said Lalu angrily, 'and you are not content!'

'I am doing business here, not charity,' came the sahukar's answer, straight and hard, completely destroying the atmosphere of goodwill he had tried to build up.

'Oh no, I never dreamed that you were doing charity,' muttered Lalu under his breath. 'No one harbours hopes from the mean. "Hope and expectation are the wealth of fools".'

'Go, go and rest in peace,' shouted the Seth, infuriated by the boys's rebuff. ' "The thief threatening the Sheriff". You have hardly grown up and you talk to me like that. Have you forgotten that they had to blacken your face and put you on a donkey in order to teach you a lesson for

your rogueries? You needn't teach me accounts. I have to guard myself against risks. And if your father wants to borrow the money he will have to give me a security and regular interest. Your family have not paid all the arrears of interest on the mortgage of jewellery, nor released it for years. How am I to know that you will ever be in a position to pay back? That is the talk!'

' "Whose blanket is lost"? You have got the jewellery, haven't you?' whispered Lalu.

'Ohe, ja, ja, Lal Singha,' said Sharm Singh brutally. 'Let us do the business. Ja, you don't know how to talk.'

'I don't want to do business with you any longer,' announced the Seth. 'I was quite willing to lend you the money a moment ago. But now I don't want to have anything to do with people who can't even control their children. "The dog only obeys the lifted stick".'

'Ohe, ja, Lal Singha, ja away,' urged Sharm Singh.

'Don't mind the boy,' said old Nihalu. 'By the oath of Wah Guru, debt makes hard times. Brother, let us settle it quietly.'

And then he turned to Lalu and said, 'Ja, son, get along. This is an affair between the elders.'

Lalu walked away, flushed with shame that he had made a fool of himself by not restraining his impetuous outburst.

'I tell you that boy is dragging the name of your family into dust,' said the Seth as Lalu showed his back. 'He has no religion left. He smokes, eats with Muhammadans, frequents the houses of prostitutes and is dragging even my son into the murky pit of infamy and perdition. If I were his father I would give him a good hiding and restore him to his senses!'

'Oh, don't be angry, uncle,' pleaded Sharm Singh. 'He has caused us a great deal of trouble. And you are right. Bapu beat him when he came back from the fair and he had a bad time. But you know it is difficult with a head-strong grown-up boy like that. Now come and take that portfolio and draw up the paper.'

'No, no, to lend is to buy a quarrel,' said the Seth,

contorting his face into a terrible frown.

There was an awkward stillness for a moment, during which the easy monotonous sound of peasants talking in the nearby shops could be heard in the dark.

'Oh come, brother, you won't turn an old man away from your door like this,' appealed Nihalu.

'Acha, for your sake and for the sake of Sharm Singh, I will let you have the money this time,' assented the Seth. 'But I must have the grain for a security,' he continued, 'though it hardly seems worth ten rupees.'

And he fetched his ledger and, painting the forefingers of the old man and Sharm Singh from a bottle of black Indian ink with a quill pen, he imprinted the marks on a clear sheet. Then he counted out the money from an iron safe which stood beside him.

'I will fill the items later,' he said. And they gratefully accepted the favour.

XV

"WHAT need have you of a bag if you have four and spend five "?' said Lalu as he looked at the splendid knotted white string satchel in which he carried the rent money to the temporary office which the patwari from the tehsil khana of Manabad had opened in the caravanserai. He had been deputed to take the money because the old man and Sharm Singh thought he would be able to check up the calculations of the accountant. And he had dutifully agreed to go, though he had disapproved of the manner in which they had borrowed the money for the rent.

A man stood mowing long grass and weeds in a swamp by the road for a skinny cow which puffed and blew a smoky breath into the fine, chilly morning, while a swarm of sparrows fluttered about the granary outside the courtyard of the caravanserai. And he thought gloomily of the relentless official who would accept the bag of money, and another, and another, year after year, while his family sank into debt. They would soon have to feed the cattle on thistles and long

grass just as that man was feeding his cow, while the granaries of Seth Chaman Lal, the landlord, and the Sarkar multiplied with grain weighing hundreds of pounds. It was all manoeuvred with such deft and sure cunning, with such slick grace. And the peasants were an easy prey—such fools, poor, ignorant, groping fools, and the whole cause of their ruin was debt.

And he cursed them again for borrowing money, and cursed the superstitions about marriages and funerals, the meaningless ceremonies to observe for which they borrowed money. He was sure that if only his family could start anew, fair and square, free of the obligations on previous mortgages of land and jewellery, the ten acres they had could be made to pay even when prices were falling.

But it was futile protesting, he said to himself, and edged past a lean, naked sweeper child with a belly as large as a pitcher, who wallowed in the dust, eating pieces of clay as his anaemic-looking sister swept the horse-dung from before the serai.

He entered the crumbling hall of the old rest-house, blinded by the smoke of charcoal and log fires that some passing beggars had lit to keep themselves warm. The stinking cesspools of horse, donkey and dog-dung and urine that lay mixed with grass in the puddles of the courtyard, assailed his nostrils and made his stomach turn. He lifted his shirt to his nose in disgust. The picture of the Moghul palaces in the history books he had read glimmered before his eyes. This house seemed like the corpse of the imposing, pillared mansions that the ancient kings built. A glorious structure it must have been, built for the agents who came to collect revenue, and for travellers. But nothing remained of its splendour save a few chimneyless hovels and stables used by outcasts such as Jhandu and 'the mother of dogs' and ragged paupers who rested in their journeying across the country with hope in their eyes and hunger in the pits of their stomachs. The only part of the building that was still intact was the police station, which was used as a barn by the officials.

'Scum of the earth! Why did you accept a fifth fare

when you had promised to reserve the seat for me? Why did you insult me like that, swine?' Lalla Padam Chand, the patwari, was shouting at someone from where he rested the enlarged posterior of a strangely puffed-up body as he inhaled an invisible smoke through the long tube of a silver hookah specially kept by the sahukar for the delectation of visting officials.

Lal Singh quickened his pace through the stinking cesspools of the courtyard and walked up unobtrusively to the circle of men who stood and sat round the accountant.

'Tell me, son of a dog, how dare you insult an official of the Sarkar like that?' the accountant bellowed as he held the tube of the hookah in one hand and gesticulated with the other at Gughi's father, who crouched near the foot of the bed under the shadow of a red-uniformed chaprasi.

'Sarkar,' said Jhandu, joining his hands to the accountant, 'please believe that the mother of that boy had booked the front seat a day before, and I thought he could be squeezed in between your honour and myself, as I generally sit on the pedal.'

'You are a liar,' bawled the accountant. 'Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?'

'Huzoor, mai-bap,' urged Jhandu, half-ironically, 'you wouldn't listen yesterday. You lost your temper.'

'Son of a swine!' the accountant shouted. 'How dare you accuse me of losing my temper! I was only furious at your neglect of my orders. Don't you realize that I like a comfortable journey home after I have been dealing with this scum of earth all day?'

'But, protector of the poor,' said Jhandu. 'You are losing your temper now. And yesterday huzoor was shouting and abusing more than today. I couldn't put a word in edgeways.'

The peasants seated around laughed at this.

'Keep silent!' roared the accountant, rising suddenly livid with rage and discomfiture, his face knotted up like a fist in action. 'This is no joke or tamasha. I am a Sarkari official and this son of a dog refused me the

front seat on his carriage and, over and above that, loaded the vehicle with more passengers than the law allows. I shall teach him the lesson of his life. I shall show him a power more powerful than his body. A rogue of number ten. We all know, at the tehsil, of his deeds. How is that whore you are keeping and for whom you became a Muhammadan?'

'Please forgive him this time,' one of the peasants interposed. 'He doesn't get many passengers in a day going to the town. And he has to live. Of course, the Sarkar ought to come first, but. . . .'

'He was going to leave me standing on the roadway and refused to take that boy off. And I had to ride in a congested carriage. I would have notified the authorities then and there in town, but I took pity on him as I thought of my wife anxiously waiting for me at home. And I hoped that he would apologize for his misdeeds. Instead he says, "May the misers fade", just as I have walked away a few yards and am hardly out of hearing. . . .'

'Ohe, ask for the Patwari Sahib's forgiveness, go on, join your hand to him,' suggested a peasant.

But Jhandu now sat self-contained and dumb, completely apathetic to the words of the official. Everyone waited tensely. And Lalu hoped he would speak out his real mind and not accept the humiliation. Jhandu was not the kind of person to tolerate such bullying. Once, Lalu remembered, he had been taken to court for beating up the landlord's son when the latter had struck him with a whip in the days when the yekka-wallah was a serf on Harbans Singh's farms. But since the village had begun to ostracize him because he had brought Babban Jan the courtesan to live with him, and had become a Muhammadan, his spirit had been slowly broken. And latterly he had been much reduced in health by chronic dysentery. His physical strength, once the byword of every village within the district, was ebbing. And he had begun to accept the humiliations heaped on him by the villagers with a grunt and a nod where before he would have roared like a lion.

'You see, folks,' said the patwari, turning round to

everyone. 'The dog won't even answer me, to say nothing of apologizing. . . .' And as he swerved, he seemed to become conscious of his own weakness and impotence against the stubborn, solid rock of the carriage-driver's body.

'Beat him, ohe Napoo, flog the swine!' he snarled, grinding his teeth as he put his hands on his hips and made ready to stand and watch the culprit being punished, a half-fearful, half-triumphant smile on his lips.

'Ohe, ask for the Sarkar's forgiveness, fool,' urged Napoo Singh, the policeman, who cast the shadow of his uniformed presence over Jhandu.

'Yar' ask for the Patwari Sahib's forgiveness,' urged the peasant who had first suggested this amicable arrangement. 'And let him cool down and get on to business, collecting our rents. We have got to get back. There is work waiting for us, and the sun is rising high.'

'But what is my crime?' asked Jhandu quietly, streaks of blood glistening in his eyes, though his round, heavy face was still set and impassive.

'What is your crime?' cried the patwari. And he rushed towards the Pahlwan and kicked him with the black English boots he wore under his tight breeches.

'Sarkar! Sarkar!' shouted the peasants, 'Please control your anger!'

'Ohe, ask for his forgiveness,' insisted Napoo.

'Get up and defend yourself, ohe, lion,' urged Lalu, coming into the arena.

But Jhandu was not roused at this suggestion. He simply pushed away the patwari's leg. 'Go, go and rest,' he said, 'or you will get such a beating as you have never had in your life.'

'Look, folks, look at his impudence, he has no shame, no respect, and I have nearly sprained my legs,' shouted the patwari, as he settled back upon his bedstead, caressing the shin which Jhandu had brushed aside. 'Look, people, and bear witness for me in the court of law for this assault on a Government official.'

'Ohe, come, Babuji, collect the money,' said Lal Singh, trying to restrain his growing anger. 'Come and attend to

your job and go your way, or you will get more than you are asking for from him.'

'Who are you to counsel me?' shouted the patwari, coming up to the boy with upraised hand.

'Ohe,' said Jhandu rising at last, and putting his right hand on the patwari's neck. 'If you touch that boy, I will eat you alive. You have no quarrel with him. And as for the seat you had yesterday, I am no sycophant of yours or of the Sarkar. I took you ten miles on my carriage free of charge, because you had no other conveyance and I couldn't see you trudging it. I didn't want to row with you yesterday when you abused me and went on about the front seat. But you can't expect me to give you a free ride, and in the front seat, when someone else has paid for it before. I have to live, and to feed that mare. So now be quiet and don't come riding on at me again. I shall not sue you and your Sarkar for the fare. Take a few cream-cakes for your wife and children with that money, wretch. But don't show me any more of that swagger!'

'I would have paid you the fare if you hadn't sold that seat before,' answered the patwari, half humiliated at the exposure, though constant bribery had taught him to expect a free ride as a legitimate right due to his position as an official of the angrezi Sarkar.

'Come then, pay up now. You had the seat,' declared Jhandu, grim and stern, putting his hand forward.

'I had the seat, but that boy was there,' said the patwari, wriggling out of the awkwardness.

'You are all the same, you officials of the Sarkar!' said Jhandu, walking away, 'whether you be civil servants or army folk or police folk. You expect us to give you everything for nothing as soon as you put on a kot patloon or a uniform. And you bully and bluff and swagger about at poor people. . . . Someday, somewhere, something will happen, however, my friend, and you will go back to where you came from. So you had better settle to your work in the meanwhile and collect as much money as you can for the Sarkar from these peasants, for the day of reckoning draws near.'

'This man is a robber, an accomplice of the bandits who looted the Tehsildar of Sherkot, and he dares to talk to me like that,' said the patwari. 'I will report him to the police.'

'Report me to whoever you like,' said Jhandu turning his back on the man and stalking out of the arena. 'Report it to anybody from Thanedar Muhammad Din to the tunda lat. They can't extract any more commission from me then they already do. And at the best they can only send me to jail. Well, I have been there before, and don't mind going again. . . .'

'The man is a criminal, a dangerous criminal,' spluttered the patwari, with a pale face. 'Keep a look out on him, Napoo. And you are all witnesses to this incident, you men, see the son of a swine. I'll teach him the lesson of his life.'

And he brushed his clothes and tried to collect his dignity after this preliminary encounter. 'Bring up the money illegally begotten, all of you,' he shouted.

Lalu saw the giant form of Jhandu retreat to the open-air stables where his mare was quietly grazing on a heap of dry grass while a colt nibbled nervously at her side.

He looked towards the patwari with the words of Jhandu in his mind and the bag of money in his hand. It was not yet his turn to pay. He would have to procrastinate to suit the Sarkar's pleasure. . . .But though he was afraid of the consequences, the encounter he had witnessed had somehow strengthened his self-assurance.

XVI

LALU was afraid that the patwari might report him and Jhandu to the tehsildar or the landlord. And his fears increased when, a few days after the rent collection, it was announced that the head of the district, Mr. Hercules Long, Deputy Commissioner, was coming on a visit to the village. 'Perhaps,' he thought, 'the Sahib Bahadur wants to inquire into this matter personally.'

For this Sahib Bahadur, Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Hercules Long, was a strange young Englishman, completely unlike his tribe in the manner and method of his approach to the problems of life, to his office and to the villages in the district of Manabad over which he ruled.

Though he had come to India only a few years ago, it was said that he was born there, being the only son of Sir John Long, an ex-Governor of the province of Bihar and Orissa, and Lady Fanny Long, a fat padre's daughter. And rumour in Manabad had it that Hercules was so called because he had been a model baby who weighed ten pounds at birth. Constant illness during childhood however had reduced and stunted him, and he grew up thin and small.

But Christian names once given cannot be withdrawn, and though the nickname Jumbo that his parents gave him lapsed, Hercules was transferred from birth certificate to life, to the exclusion of Henry and Havelock, the other two Christian names given to him after his grandfather on his mother's side, who had fought in the mutiny.

There was a legend current in Lalu's school at Sherkot, of which Mr. Long was a patron, that the Sahib's first name Hercules had been somewhat of a joke to his school-fellows at Bishop Cotton School in Simla. It was said that he had often complained to the masters about how John or Bill or Peter had ragged him, until one day the sports master had caught him sulking in a corner of the racquets court and had lectured him and asked him to stand up for himself and live up to the name of Hercules. This talk was supposed to have inoculated the Sahib against his adversaries. On the strenght of this tonic he had beaten up the young Rajah of Jubbal and thrown a grandson of the late commander-in-chief into a khud. For a drooping chest and a puny five foot six these were remarkable feats. And from that day Hercules Long had never looked backwards! He was said to be strong in justice and a friend of the poor. Under the name of Aflatun he wrote interminable treatises full of wise sayings for the edification of illiterate village! And he even flouted the orders of the Sarkar in his efforts to

ameliorate the lot of the peasantry.

The Sarkar was not too pleased with him in consequence and thought his ideas dangerous. But all the suspicions and doubts of Governors had not disturbed the faith of the Sahib in his own strenght—the faith that was set on moving mountains. He was supposed to have invented a wonderful programme to help the farmers. But it still remained a paper policy, because its protagonist was chained to the rules and regulations of the Sarkar. It was rumoured that the other officials considered him a thorn in their flesh, since he kicked against the pricks, though he did so with the chivalrous discretion that is the motherland's legacy to her literate.

It was alleged, for instance, that he completely disapproved of the Government revenue policy. He thought it iniquitous that the peasants should be fleeced annually of one-third of their produce. But knowing that there was no solution of the difficulty, as the Sarkar depended on land revenue to maintain a large army, he had devised odd schemes to rid the peasantry of some of their misery, in order to quieten the unrest in his own conscience without conflicting too violently with the wishes of the Sarkar.

The major scheme he was trying to apply on a large scale was the training of the youth of the villages through the Boy Scout Movement, so that the future generation of peasants would grow up a hale, healthy, strong, intelligent and well-organized body of men. At school Lalu had attended a boy scout rally that Hercules Long Sahib had inspected. And he liked the idea of the movement coming to the village, as it would give an excuse to all the boys to wear angrezi shirts, shorts and boots. But the other ideas of the Deputy Commissioner were less intelligible to Lalu.

If rumours were true, the Sahib had gone about for several days at Verka not only making observations and experiments on the conditions of farming, but measuring the skulls of the peasants.

The peasant folk didn't know what to make of him. He insisted on talking to them for hours, walking into their homes, asking them to take their turbans off, which was an insult to their izzat since the head-dress is sacred, and sud-

denly leaving this work to join the sport of their children. He went about dressed in a khaki shirt, shorts, basket hat, bare-legged with Indian sandals on his feet. He was so unlike the other Deputy Commissioners who came in motu cars, chatted to the landlord, the tehsildar, a few elders of the village, and then shot off, leaving the curious to swallow the dust of their cars and tremble with the fear of their scarlet faces.

Mrs. Hercules Long too was a strange apparition, a longhaired, under-sized woman who went about drawing pictures of the peasant-folk. The rustics had watched her with bated breath as they held the fingers of amazement in their mouths and looked on puzzled, unquestioning, with a curiosity mixed with affection and admiration.

Lalu had heard that Mr. and Mrs. Hercules Long were coming down to the village of Nandpur. But he had no idea, as he sat on the shaft of the well driving Thiba and Rondu round and round, wondering whether the patwari had reported quarrel with Jhandu to the authorities, that the Sahib was almost within a stone's throw, investigating the odours of the slimy, green scum of the pond by Fazlu's vegetable patch.

Neither of them was aware of the other's presence, though Lalu, calling Jitu, the son of cousin Harnam Singh, who strayed about, vaguely espied the Sahib's figure, and Mr. Hercules Long saw the outline of the peasant boy balanced on the shaft just before he became involved in a tense situation.

For Suchi, the buffalo, who was waiting for the cowherd to take her to the pasturage, mistook Mr. Hercules Long for her chaperon as she heard approaching footsteps. She turned from the edge of the swamp where she was playing with a frog to go on her way. But as she emerged on the dusty pathway and saw no herd but a solitary man in a strange basket hat, she stopped still and stared quizzically at this new wonder.

For a moment she was stuck dumb with fear and was about to turn back. But then, as she sniffed the air and

smelt the tang of a human body, she lifted her mouth and uttered an affectionate greeting, thinking that she would know whether he was an enemy or a friend as soon as he had made answer.

The bright stare in the glassy splendour of her eyes scared Mr. Hercules Long. He was sensitive and shy and ill at ease before the searching gaze. He had never been able to get over the dislike of the Englishman at being stared at by the natives, let alone their cattle. And in spite of all that he knew of village life, he had no understanding whatever of the language of the bovine species in India.

He thought that the buffalo was being disagreeable. He shifted on his feet and glance from side to side uneasily. The shame of knowing that he had boasted so often to his wife of his complete familiarity with cattle kept him from turning tail. But it did not cheer his brain with the knowledge that the situation was one to be handled casually. Suchi whisked her tail to signal a gesture of goodwill, and took a few steps in order to come and meet the strange apparition half-way. But Mr. Long retreated more than half-way, with no gesture of goodwill. He had quite forgotten what he had found some difficulty in learning, namely, that as an Englishman he ought to keep a stiff upper lip always.

Trembling, with shaking legs, and coloured red and white from his lean neck upwards, he waved his hand and made a 'shooing' noise, as if Suchi were a cat, a dog, a bird or some other creature which you could dismiss with a grunt or a nod.

But the Indian buffalo is not unlike the Hindu race, a tame, docile species, tolerant and hospitable in the extreme, spontaneous and natural, weak-willed through want, and yet possessed of a curious fire which has helped it to endure through thousands of years. Suchi wanted to be friendly, so she stood still in spite of Mr. Long's shooing. She was more curious than ever now to discover who this man could be who knew not the elementary rules of behaviour among men and beasts. And after having a good look round she lifted her muzzle, mooed a playful note and waved her head with a mischievous smile.

Mr. Hercules Long did not wait for her to advance. The curved horns of the buffalo, approaching slowly and surely towards him, were all that he could see. Already he could picture himself lifted up from his feet and flung into the air. His mouth was parched. He missed a series of heartbeats and stood riveted to the earth, incapable of movement. The panic in his soul grew, and in the darkness before his eyes the contours of the demoniac buffalo assumed the proportions of a huge black rock, a mountain, such a mountain in fact as no faith could move, not even the faith of Hercules Long.

Suchi nodded another greeting, whisked her tail, snorted warmly, opened her mouth and took another step forward.

Mr. Long lifted his hands as if to ward the buffalo off. He was bathed in sweat from head to foot. His back was bent, his shoulders hunched as if he were a snail trying to shrink into the shell of his being.

Then, suddenly, he shook his head as if in a last desperate effort to reassert his manhood. But the odds seemed fearful. Pale with defeat and despair, he squinted behind his glasses and looked wildly round for a safe spot where he could retreat. He must not be hurt. He must not die. He must remain for another day, for today, for the Durbar when he was to address the villagers.

But the land was even and there seemed no safe haven of escape except on the right bank of the pond where there was a tree. Without a thought, he turned on his feet and ran towards the tree.

Suchi was fascinated by the vision of the strange man. And she feared that her last chance of making friends with him was going. So she ran behind him, dancing on her hind legs, wagging her tail, prancing here and there till her hulking form gleamed in a fine frenzy of movement. And she mooed the heartiest good wishes she could command in the bovine language.

Mr. Hercules Long was not skilled in the art of climbing trees. But the crisis called for action. And so, with a little grazing of his head and bare knees, he managed to scramble up the trunk of the kikar which stood by the

pond.

Suchi rushed to the tree with all her pent-up affection and enthusiasm. But she couldn't get any contact with Mr. Long as he had just lifted his shins up to his haunches for safety. She now stood staring up at him, rather chagrined and crestfallen.

'Naughty, naughty,' Mr. Long said as he lifted the forefinger of his right hand, his legs still cramped beneath him.

Suchi couldn't make out what the man meant and, turning her head aside, she ogled him with renewed wonder and curiosity.

Mr. Long made a clucking noise with his tongue and phooed loudly with his lips.

For a moment, Suchi kept her eyes fixed on him as before. Then, utterly disappointed by the stranger's refusal of her affectionate greetings, she fumed with an impatience that brought froth to her mouth, stamped on the earth and charged at the tree in an effort to dislodge him.

But Mr. Long was not to be shaken off the tree at any cost. He clung to the trunk though his legs were giving way under him and his body was beginning to stiffen with cramp. He hung on to the tree, precariously within reach of the buffalo's angry breath. He hung on desperately with his hands and his feet, almost with his teeth, his nose and his eyelids.

Suchi glared at him again, with mixed feelings of resentment and hurt pride. Then she retraced a few steps and stood still, thinking that either he would come down of his own accord or tumble down with fatigue.

Lalu had watched the exchanges between Suchi and the Sahib first with amusement, then with a growing excitement. But now the situation seemed to have become grim. Suchi looked dangerous as she had seldom done since she had been attacked by a hunter's dog. And the Sahib was certainly in a perilous position as he sat suspended awkwardly from the trunk of the kikar-tree. He would have rushed to the aid of the Sahib, but he was waiting for Jitu to come and take his place on the shaft.

'Ohe, Jitu, ohe, Jitu,' he called to the boy who sat by a ditch washing some carrots he had stolen. 'Go and move Suchi away from there.'

Jitu ran fast for his five years on his little legs, as if impelled by the sight of the Englishman which had the attraction of novelty for him as much as for Suchi. He came and stood staring amazedly, now at Suchi, now at the Sahib. Then he smiled, walked up to the buffalo, struck it hard on the nose with the end of the half-chewed carrot he held in his hand, and abused her shrilly. 'May you die, may I wear shoes made of your hide. Do you want a bambooing on your head, sister-in-law?'

The beast bent her muzzle as if to receive the punishment she deserved and turned her face away from the trunk of the tree which she had menaced.

Jitu ordered her to bend and she stooped low. Then he got up on her back, and, striking her on the flanks with his fist and his heels, he led her away to the manger by the well.

Mr. Hercules Long descended from the tree and looked about guilty. He cast a furtive sidelong glance at the boy, wishing that the peasant lad had not been the witness of his discomfiture. But while he shifted on his feet, torn by an impulse to go and take the boy into his confidence and end his embarrassment, Lalu left Jitu in charge of the well and ran up impetuously.

'Good morning, sir,' he said, 'the buffalo didn't mean any harm. She belongs to us and she is quite docile.'

'But you talk English,' the Sahib said, changing the subject with a blush.

'I was educated up to the eighth class at the Church Mission High School at Sherkot,' Lalu said, 'I was in the Boy Scout Rally which you inspected three years ago.'

'Oh, you are a boy scout already,' said Mr. Long eagerly. 'Come to the Durbar in the afternoon then.'

'I will come, sir, surely,' Lalu replied.

'Good, very good,' said Mr. Long and he give Lalu a nervous smile and then, with an absent-minded good morning, he walked away. It was lucky on the whole that his

wife hadn't been with him. For she might have been frightened. And if she had witnessed his behaviour. . . . He recalled that once he had been led by the desire to engage her in conversation to boast of how he had fought and overcome a Brahminee bull in the village of Telian when he had really run away from a herd of cows. True, he had only told her this jokingly, but she was naive and had believed him. This time he couldn't go as far as proclaiming a conquest, because the memory of the little boy leading the buffalo away would make the yarn stick in his throat. And, besides, this youth at the well had seen the whole thing exactly as it happened. The best thing to save face with everyone was to make friends with him, and hope the whole thing would blow over. He shrugged his shoulders at his naive thoughts. Then, as if to dispel the uneasiness of his conscience, he tried to think how lucky he was to have met the boy. He was just the man to be the leader of the boy scouts in the village. He would draw him out as a model scout at the Durbar. And thus ruminating, he rambled off.

Lalu looked long at the retreating figure of the Sahib. It was a red-letter day in the history of his life to meet a Sahib other than the padre, who, in spite of all his kindness, was dull like any priest. It was exciting to talk to a real Sahib, who, they said, was also interested in improving the village. And as he headed towards the well he looked forward excitedly to the Durbar.

XVII

A BRIEF siesta after lunch and Mr. Long had sufficiently recovered from the shock of the morning's embarrassment to begin drafting notes of his researches in the village. He chewed his pipe as he sat absorbed in work, his blood urged to activity by the cold. Mrs. Long, having dozed in the drowsy warmth of her heavy blanketed camp-bed, was just pulling herself together before a camp mirror when Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh called suddenly to fetch the Sahib

and the Mem-Sahib for the Durbar.

The orderly had told him that it was too early to disturb the Sahib. But the Sardar Bahadur had a compelling personality, and as he stood by the office tent, his generous contours, which had been somewhat reduced through the profuse sweat which his recent strenuous activities had produced, severely buttoned in a black frock coat, over which there was a loose gold-brocaded coat with a Kaisar-i-hind gold medal and various other insignia and decorations, his dumb-bell legs compressed into tight white flannel trousers, his head bound in a turban which looked like a sun helmet, his cloudy beard washed clean for the occasion. The orderly was too impressed to make any overtures for the habitual bakshish and went in to announce the landlord.

The Sardar Bahadur, mindful of the previous Englishmen he had met, anticipated a full-dress, frock-coat regalia, and beamed with happiness. But though he himself had spared no pains to appear resplendent, Mr. Hercules Long emerged in the khaki shirt, shorts and solar hat which he always wore, to which he had added a Kashmir tweed Norfolk jacket for warmth. And Mrs. Long lighted upon the scene in a rugged tailor-made suit which rested an old, shapeless, teddy-bear coat.

The landlord, albeit somewhat taken aback, offered hearty greetings to the honoured guests and shook hands with them with an enthusiasm which nearly dislocated Mrs. Long's wrist. The Head of the District returned the compliment by lifting his eyebrows at the grandiose canopy which was crowded with white-sheeted forms a hundred yards away.

The laws of formal intercourse made the walk to the canopy excruciating, as the Sardar Bahadur let loose a further flood of involved, incoherent compliments. Mr. and Mrs. Long exchanged a happy smile for a brief second, to find themselves walking out into the crisp, clear air which seemed to flow down from the pools of the blue heaven on the shining white dust of the maidan, with the tang of the Punjab winter, the loveliest winter in the world. Then they blushed with self-consciousness and again lent a dutiful ear

to the landlord's flowery homilies and cast a distracted eye over the faded posters of 'Welcome' pasted on the canopy.

The general malaise was smothered for a while by the band of Chaudhri Abdullah, which usually played snatches of European music at marriage, births betrothals and other ceremonies in the gullies of Manabad. The musicians swayed to and fro in ecstasy in their loose, faded, gold-embroidered uniforms, sawing at 'Auld Lang Syne' with energy and agility.

The eccentric Deputy Commissioner sought to preserve at least the appearance of gratitude as the crowd of dark-tanned old men and young men, fat men and lean men, dressed in holiday clothes stood up and shouted weird, nervous, hilarious cries. Only his nose wrinkled slightly as he began to see above the heads of the peasants great life-size portraits of Sikh saints which were nailed to bamboo poles or hung like festoons from the canvas side by side with gaudily framed lithographs of Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, and photos of the Sardar Bahadur and the local gentry in various incarnations—an imposing art gallery which seemed to represent the pooled resources of the creative life of the village. For a moment his sense of duty battled with his sense of the ridiculous. But the victory was a foregone conclusion. And he and his wife grimly followed the Sardar Bahadur, greeting the saluting, supplicating gentry who adorned the platform. They enthroned themselves on their chairs, quietly falling in with the arrangements and accepting the part allotted to them by God Almighty, the Angrezi Sarkar and the as-yet-unknown fate controlled by the will of the capricious but highly capable and pushing old landlord, Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh.

The action lacked organic development for a moment. Mr. and Mrs. Hercules Long were the only two white people perched on the pedestal, while the landlord fussed round completing the preparations and the peasants stared and coughed and spat and babbled away among themselves.

There was some relief when the moneylender, who had just arrived, walked through the crowd, dragging his son, Churanji, bejewelled and decked in velvet. Touching first

the earth at Mr. Long's feet and then his own forehead with his right hand, he expostulated, 'Huzoor, mai-bap. I am your servant, Seth Chaman Lal, banker and general merchant of Nandpur, and this is my son, Churnji Lal. . . . Ohe, Salaam the Sahib.'

'Acha hai?' Mr. Long said, acknowledging the gesture of reverence and goodwill with a smile, and motioning the sahukar and his son to the empty chairs on the left.

'Look, ohe, see. The Sahib speaks our language,' Gughi cried impetuously to Lalu from where they stood craning their necks by a canopy pole.

At that moment there was a noise of phut-phut-phut-phuti, and the attention of the crowd was distracted to the burly figure of a Sahib dressed in a blue suit with a flower in his buttonhole, coming with the long-robed, white-bearded Padre Annandale, the Head Master of Sherkot School.

'The Sahib who is going to be in charge of the new Power House,'the rumour ran through the audience.

'Ohe, look at his mooch,' a voice shouted suddenly, and there were peals of laughter at the waxed ends of the new Sahib's moustache.

'Henry Heath Sahib, who used to be engineer on the canal-head at Bariwall,' said Lalu to Gughi.

'Oh, "Hendry" Sahib, who is supposed to be a budmash!' said Gughi loudly.

'Silence,' commanded Hardit Singh, the son of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, who stood very importantly by the dais, dressed in a brown serge suit and a many-coloured Patiala style turban.

Mr. Long shook hands with the Padre and the engineer. Then his eyes wandered to the place where the hush had been restored so sternly, and, recognizing the face of his confidant of the morning, he smiled benignly at Lalu. Again a moment of tense excitement and irritation, during which the sweat damped his forehead and there was a queer motion in the pit of his stomach.

Just then Mrs. Long nudged her husband, not only because she wanted to draw his attention to the presence of Lalla Balmukand, the vakil, a familiar figure at Manabad

garden parties, with an enormous turban on his diminutive shapeless body, but because she hoped that this friendly gesture might convey her sympathy for his difficulties.

This embarrassed Mr. Long more than ever. And flushing vividly, he looked at the boy who had witnessed his discomfiture in the morning, and, clucking his tongue on his palate and producing a sound which was half-bellow, half-tcha, he tried to communicate his disapprobation of it all.

Lalla Balmukand leaned across Master Hukam Chand, the school-teacher, and Mahant Nandgir, the squint-eyed saint, who sat in his orange-silk robes, to convey his compliments. And Mr. Long, with a superhuman effort, conjured up his cenemonial smile.

But now the landlord was on his feet.

'Mishta Hercules Long Sahib, Ha-Sey-Esh, Dipty Collacter Sahib Bahadur and Chief Magister of Manabad, Tehsil Sherkot. District Manabad,' began the Sardar Bahadur in that curiously raucous Punjabized English which played havoc with the vowels as well as the consonants and which, rolling thunderously across from under the Sardar Bahadur's forest of moustache and beard, achieved the peculiar sonority of gong notes, 'Wulcome.'

Mr. Long bowed suddenly in an attempt to cut the landlord short, but it was a futile gesture.

'With respect and submission,' the landlord continued fulsomely, 'I must humbly beg your honour to accept the homage of the gentry of this village and the cordial thanks of the people . . . .

'We have gathered here in accord with the traditional loyalty of the notable members of this village in seclusion to unfurl before your person the heavy fullness of our hearts.'

At this point in his oration, the landlord clasped his belly, tightly girded in his frock-coat, and beamed a greasy grimace upon Mr. Long, who squirmed restlessly on his flower-decked chair.

'It is an auspicious circumstance,' he continued, 'that this Durbar has been graced by the feet of His Holiness, Mahant Nandgir Sahib of Nandpur Math . . . .'

The Mahant, arrayed in orange robes, oozed with a smile to hear his name mentioned, while Mr. Long surveyed the holy man's dusty feet with an arched glance which, however, faded into a jaded pout as the landlord perspired his way through a long account of the meritorious history of the Mahant and his worthy ancestors.

But his flagging interest was rudely awakened when the Mahant got up, advanced ponderously towards him, put a garland of marigolds round his neck and blessed him with a mumbled verse and a benediction of the hand. He wriggled uneasily as the Mahant retreated and then, with an abrupt movement and an awkward grin, took the garland off and put it round the neck of Mrs. Long, to the accompaniment of laughter and loud, shrill cries from the peasants, who found welcome relief from the incomprehensible angrezi talk of the Sardar Bahadur in this little domestic drama.

But the landlord, after frowning his disapproval of this raucous interruption from the crowd and nodding his head in the direction of Mr. Long as though to approve his chivalrous action, went racing ahead.

'Hony. Captain Risaldar Major, Sardar Fateh Singh is also here,' he boomed. And a full five minutes of compliment and rhetoric were required to account for this worthy's prowess and the merits of his impeccable ancestry.

'Sardar Fateh Singh has been blessed with the gift of an adult son,' the landlord concluded on a note of bathos. 'Sardar Amar Singh is now studying in the ninth class at the Government High School, Manabad, and it is hoped and trusted that he will keep the tradition of devoted and steadfast, unwavering loyalty and multifarious, meritorious services alive for ever in this high and lofty family . . . .'

Upon this Risaldar Major Fateh Singh, a rickety, bent, old figure in full uniform, got up, clicked the heels of his military boots and, with his left hand on his sword, saluted with the right.

'Wah, wah shera!' the croud bawled.

Mr. Long felt his head getting dizzy with the heat of the landlord's eloquent tributes to the gentry and the sudden outbursts of the crowd. The ponderous enthusiasm with

which the old man delivered himself was only calculated to bolster up the colossal bluff of his own importance.

How childish these Indians were about honours, he reflected. He had to sit there and listen to this fantastic English speeches, almost as dumb as that submissive cattle, the peasantry, while the sun was shining on the world outside, dispersing the smell of the dew across the smoke of the village and painting the land redder than the lyrical crimsons of his wife's watercolours. It would soon be retreating from the afternoon, taking with it the chances of a walk among the purple orchids, the pale white and red berries and a hundred other green sorceries.

He might have done better as a don at Cambridge, he thought dismally, as a writer of text-books, or as curator of a Museum. Or perhaps . . . .

'Seth Chaman Lal,' roared the landlord across the file of papers which he clutched firmly in his sweating hands, 'is a member of the District Board and proprietor of the firm of Chaman Lal Churanji Lal, grain and cloth merchants . . . .'

The Seth beamed placidly as he bowed his head, sensing though not understanding the avalanche of florid rhetoric which followed. But then, catching sight of Gughi and Lalu who were putting their fingers to their nose in the direction of Churanji, he gave a furious scowl and nudged his reprobate son to recall him to the importance of the occasion.

'Loyalty to Government is the first lesson taught to one born in the family,' the landlord continued, unaware of this comic aside. 'Lalla Chaman Lal takes a keen and enterprising interest in all movements aiming at public good and national welfare and is very influential and respected in high circles. He rendered valuable assistance to Sarkari officers during the blackest foulest plague epidemic of nineteen hundred and eleven. He possesses numerous certificates and various recommendations testifying to his public services, including one for courageously effecting the capture of the notorious dacoit, Dula Singh. And he has been blessed with a sanad from the Commissioner Sahib Bahadur for nobly constructing a shrine to the memory of his respected

father on the pond facing north of this village . . . '

Seth Chaman Lal got up rather prematurely to join his hands to the Deputy Commissioner and cut the Sardar Bahadur's words. And someone from under the canopy shouted, 'Don't you slip while you bow before the Sahib.'

Mr. Long's face was now flaming. He shifted on his chair, turned his head from one side to the other, crossed and uncrossed his legs and gave such uncompromising indications of his disgust and discomfort that even the Sardar Bahadur could make no mistake about the Deputy Commissioner's state of mind.

'There are other noteworthy notabilities,' he said nervously, turning a page, 'whose honourable and honoured names I would like to mention to the commendation of your grace. But your honour has already received so many and varied marks of esteem and confidence and goodwill from the gentry of various villages in this district. We know that you have the best interests of all and sundry in your noble heart . . . . So that I shall only call to the favour of your attention the presence among us here of Lalla Balmukand Vakil, High Court, Lahore, Lalla Hukam Chand, Head Master, Nandpur Primary School, Lalla Bhagat Ram, Contractor, and Sardar Hardit Singh, my son and successor to the landlordship, and Rais-i-azam of Patiala . . . .

' The mental effort of your honour's occupations commands such great areas of abilities that forsooth we had thought ourselves doomed by an unlucky star in the firmament as you did not come for so long. Now, since your high-minded consideration has turned your thoughts this side, it is my humble duty to greet you and your consort in the name of the village inhabitants of Nandpur for the trouble you have taken in downtrodding on foot by the dusty track in miserable circumstances across thorny ways. Your wonderful, strong and health-giving person has ensured your honour.'

Mr. Long shifted in his chair and deliberately willed his legs to move in a rhythmic wave of unrest as he invariably did when he was nervous in order to release the tension.

He had no illusions about the land-mouthed homilies of

Harbans Singh. He knew them to be the servile jargon of the courtier, in the tradition of his feudal ancestors, who had mixed honey with poison in negotiating the statecraft of an autocracy existing through hostility and suspicion and terror. He knew them to be the inane sentiments of a heavy, thickskinned, insensitive worthy wholly oblivious to everything except to crude lumps of experience.

He remembered a remark of one of his colleagues who had been a settlement officer for about twenty years in the United Provinces and the Punjab, that the landowning classes had never received the consideration they deserved. He had advocated that the Government of India should endeavour to draw them into the constitutional net before it was too late. He had upheld that they had administrative experience of real value, and that though conservative and arbitrary in their notions, they were well-versed in their own language and literature, were loyal and possessed of excellent manners.

'But not of excellent deportment,' Long had added, and had asked himself then as he asked himself now whether they had any knowledge of the hopeless condition of the peasantry, whether they had any idea of the terrible realities of everyday life.

He looked aside towards Padre Annandale and the engineer to see how they were bearing up. Captain Heath was fidgeting with his fingers as he sat with a vacant look on his padded face. But Father Annandale was listening intently. And feeling ashamed of his own impatience, Mr. Long applied his ears and made another effort to listen.

'Your honour,' the Sardar Bahadur was saying, 'is loved and admired in this village more than any Sahib who has ruled this district. And the fact that your honour condescends to speak Punjabi makes you very dear to us, for that you, an officer, should deign to learn our language is a great honour to us people, making our hearts overflow with gratitude. We regard you as one of us, as a member of our holy family that traces its descent from the Sikh Gurus.

'Permit me, sir, furthermore, to say that the proverb that in the British Empire, the lion can drink with the lamb

has come true, since you condescend to come down and share our humble life.

'I fervently pray you will pardon any inconvenience which you may have been put to throught the bad arrangements in the village, because, as your honour knows, these peasants are simple and ignorant, and though they do not understand all your honour's rogueries, they are your humble. . . .'

Before the Sardar Bahadur had finished his sentence, Mr. Long got up and, lifting his hand in the boy scout salute, abruptly terminated the speech of which there was still an unfinished page in his host's hand, full of a great many 'further-mores', 'your honours', 'your humble servants' and homilies and valedictions.

'I am very grateful,' he began hesitantly, awkwardly twisting his mouth to intone the difficult accents of the Punjabi language. He was greeted with a burst of applause, laughter and loud whispers of 'Look, ohe, Lehna Singha, look, ohe Jhanda Singha, the Sahib speaks our tongue.'

'I am very grateful to you, Sardar Bahadur, for your compliments. Time is short. So I hurry. I have important things to say. . . .'

'Wah, wah, he speaks well,' one peasant said, nudging his freind. 'May I be his sacrifice,' murmured another. 'What a marvel!' exclaimed a third.

'I have some, plain speaking to do to-day, to you, Sardar Sahib, who are the head of this village, and to you, my old friends and my young friends. Please don't be angry. Since I have come down to your village, I have inspected its different parts, and I think it is an awful place to live in. It is unhealthy. That is why you are always ill half of the year, and why your women die in childbirth and your children are either stillborn or have sores all over their bodies. I have counted fourteen rubbish heaps in the vicinity of your village and three big and small dirty tanks, all of which receive their water from the black, smelling sewers which flow down from your lanes and alleys. Your overcrowded mudhouses are crumbling to pieces. Your wells are dangerously near the drains and must receive all

the mud and slush of your narrow streets when the rain falls. You have no open spaces outside your village for you to take the air or for your children to play in. Your village then is a place fit only for animals to live in, and if that be so, since you live here in this dirt, you are all animals and not men.'

There were suppressed whispers at this criticism, furtive glances and the confusion of fear in many hearts.

Lal Singh's head hung down with hurt pride as he stood by the post, his face flushed at the truth of the Sahib's remarks. His own impulse to wipe the village clean of the festering sores that everywhere disfigured it arose from the half-smothered ashes of his discontent and glowed against the insult of unworthiness that the Sahib was casting on the village. And yet he was sorry that his father and his eldest brother were not in the crowd, for he knew they would be more conciliatory to him when they found confirmation of what he had said in the Sahib's words. Perhaps Dayal Singh who sat at the Mahant's feet there would tell them, but he was not supposed to be wordly and in such matters his advice was never sought.

'There is only one thing that gives me hope for your future, and the belief that you may be able to live a better life. . . .'

Mr. Long paused dramatically for effect.

The audience was tense, waiting open-mouthed for the kind word that might temper the contempt that the Sahib had heaped on their village.

'And that,' the Sahib continued, 'is the presence among you of the young men I see here. For the future of the village belongs to these young men I see here, and not, I hope that you will not be angry if I say so, to the grey-beards.'

Gughi laughed at this and some of the children echoed his laughter, while Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh pulled his beard with discomfort and irritation, and Master Hukam Chand, who saw the servants of his rod being praised and feared the loss of his authority, frowned and looked away.

'Now it is no matter for laughter, my friends, because you will have to justify yourselves by taking in your hands the destiny of the village which I am going to entrust to you.'

'I want that young man,' said Mr. Long, pointing towards Lalu. 'I want Sardar. . . .'

The audience looked round to see who it was.

'Lal Singh,' Gughi blurted out the name, pushing his friend forward.

'Yes,' said Mr. Long. 'I want Sardar Lal Singh, who has been a boy scout at school, and all the other boys under twenty to step forward and take the oath of the scout law which will be administered to them.'

'Ohe, ja, ohe, Lalu. Ohe, go,' Harnam Singh shouted proudly.

'Ohe, ja, ohe,' shouted some other peasants.

Lal Singh was elated at being singled out thus by the Sahib. It seemed a confirmation of all the vague, impractical plans to reform the village that he had evolved from his own passionate purpose and conviction. He jumped over the heads of the peasants, followed by Gughi and Ghulam, Sheikhu and Gopal, and a confused babble of approval, disapproval, contempt, wonder and ridicule.

Mr. Long looked about to see if all the boys were coming in and, seeing Churanji, who sat privileged on the dais by his father, swathed in fine clothes, caught him by the ear and dragged him into the arena, amidst wild applause and hearty laughter.

'All the boys over five and under twenty,' he shouted over the waves of talk. Then he turned to Master Hukam Chand and said, 'Master Sahib, call all your pupils.'

'Come, ohe, come, boys,' said Master Hukam Chand, standing up with a pale, weak smile on his face while the blood of anger rushed to his eyes.

There was a rough and tumble amid the noise of indecision and quick response, and with shouts of tamasha a number of boys walked up to the dais, some perkily, some with halting gait and apprehensive stares.

'Come down, Master Sahib, and help,' said Mr. Long,

descending from the dais. And he arranged the boys in lines of seven.

Then he stood at the head of them and said, 'Recite after me, Master Sahib, as well as all you boys? "On my honour I promise to do my best". '

Hukam Chand, forced out of his conservative creed into repeating this new code, seemed like a crow asked to sing the song of the dove. And some of the boys repeated the words of the scout promise, while others couldn't understand what the Sahib was saying and mumbled or remained still.

After this, Mr. Long paused to take a paper out of his pocket and said, 'Now recite the scout law.'

'Now recite the scout law.' Some of the boys repeated this injunction, parrot-wise, and there was half-suppressed laughter at this.

Mr. Long lifted his finger, however, and began to chant, 'A scout's honour is to be trusted.'

The boys became enthusiastic and, smiling, shouted and tore their throats.

'Slowly,' Mr. Long said, and continued, 'A scout is loyal to the king, his country, his officers, his parents, his employers and. . . .'

The boys were exhilarated by the force of their own voices, and shouted and chirruped their way through the nine points, their enthusiasm compensating for what was lacking in their comprehension.

The audience gaped open-mouthed, wondering what lay behind the curious magic of a ceremonial which involved their sons and left them out.

'You, Lal Singh,' said Mr. Long, drawing out the boy from the ranks, 'you will be the patrol-leader of the troop, and you will instruct the group in the duties of boy scouts.'

Lalu became conscious that he was the target of the steady glare of the landlord. And even against his wishes, he found himself staring hard back at the Sardar Bahadur.

Mr. Long looked at the troop he had created like a craftsman who measures the potential efficiency of his

handiwork. There was nothing to do after this exhibition of his will to do something for the peasants, except to amuse the villagers a little.

'Mrs. Long has been so pleased with the hospitality which the village has shown her,' he said, 'that she has asked me to say that everyone will receive four annas as a gift from us and a portion of sweets donated by the Sardar Bahadur. The boy scouts will distribute the sweets and give a demonstration of the efficiency with which this model army is going to work in the future.'

At this juncture, Lalla Balmukand, the lawyer, got up and cried three cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Long. 'Now three cheers for Father Annandale and Heath Sahib.' The Padre raised his hand to disclaim the honour, but the engineer mechanically added his voice to the rest.

The scouts then rushed about, eager to distribute the sweets from the baskets which the confectioner had brought in.

The Sardar Bahadur led Mr. and Mrs. Long, Father Annandale and Henry Heath Sahib, the Mahant, the lawyer, the contractor, the moneylender, the schoolmaster and a few other villagers who could quality for the rank of distinguished guests to the back of the canopy where tea had been laid.

'Perhaps it is a good thing,' he said nervously to the Sahib, 'that these rogues and hooligans will be disciplined. That young man whom you called comes from a family which has been very disloyal to the Sarkar.'

The band of Chaudhri Abdullah brayed forth 'God Save the King' and drowned the words.

Mr. Long stood limply where the national anthem had caught him.

XVIII

WHEN the thrill of the initiation of the boy scouts at the Durbar on the first eventful day abated under the chastening reality of the dull succession of one common-place day

to another, the interest of the village in the new-fangled notion of the Head of the District began to flag.

Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, the landlord, had not been at all enamoured of the idea from the start. The organization of the boys of the village in a body enjoying the patronage of the Deputy Commissioner might threaten his prestige locally as the only person in official contact with the Sarkar. And he did not like the prospect of Lal Singh, a member of a family with whom his father, and after his father he himself, had been at loggerheads, becoming prominent in the life of the village.

The elders of the village did not welcome the idea of the urchins going about making organized mischief, as they contemptuously designated the new code. The rogues were difficult enough to handle already. And parents turned deaf ears to their sons' demands for foreign rig-outs of khaki shirts, shorts, scarves and whistles.

Master Hukam Chand too was scared at the prospect of losing his authority. He had always mocked at European habits, saying : 'Look at these dirty English, they take out handkerchiefs from their pockets, blow their noses, spit into them and then deposit the germ-laden rags back in their pockets.' And he had often beaten the boys in the school for wearing English style clothes. So he insisted on the boys playing the indigenous game Kabadi outside school hours, and sternly discourged their attempts to drill under the guidance of 'that hooligan' Lalu, with boys like Gughi, Ghulam, Churanji, Sheikhu and Gopal.

And the fickleness of youth played into the hands of reaction. For the boys' eagerness to join the troop was mainly due to the novelty of the sport, and to their longing for the new uniforms. Their enthusiasm died an early death after a few attempts at drilling, though they held together spasmodically and joined readily enough in the rambles, raiding parties and mock fights, and in all the more vigorous manoeuvres in the programme of the boy scout movement.

Lalu felt self-conscious because of the mockery to which he knew he would be subjected if he took this business too seriously. And, apart from talking to the boys now and

then playfully, or trying occasionally to explain to them something of the life across the black waters, he was content to concentrate on the more practical aspects of the movement and encouraged the boys to open a wrestling ring. And while this plan was maturing, he kept himself to himself so as not to give the elders a chance to renew their complaints.

Besides, Dayal Singh had returned from his visit to Ishri's husband at Nowshera with a loan of three hundred rupees. Balkrishna, the Hindu priest, who was also the astrologer, had approved the spring as being propitious in every way, and preparations for the marriage, which had been delayed till the lightening of the winter days, began in real earnest.

Gujri and Kesari went round from house to house in the village with a basket of gur. And, after sweetening the mouths of the villagers, they formlly invited the brotherhood to come and join the ceremonial community singing which is held for a month or two before a marriage, and for some weeks after its celebration.

There were arguments, recriminations and remonstrances and much subtle statecraft on the part of the family to reconcile those members of the brotherhood who refused to accept the invitation, especially the family of Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh.

The empty illusion of prestige, which induced his family to spend all their money on feeding an ungrateful brotherhood and holy men as greedy as dogs, irritated Lalu, and the prospect of this fussy, long-drawn-out, wastefully expensive affair irked him. For he was convinced that the loans which the family had incurred could never be paid back and would involve the confiscation of mortgaged property. And his unvoiced chagring increased the isolation he had felt before the visit of the Deputy Commissioner.

Every time he came home from the fields and saw some women gathered round his mother discussing the details of this ceremony or that, talking of the shades of silk that were in vogue in the city for wedding dresses and the king of jewellery that was fashionable, he felt ill at ease and shied

away from the gathering with a bent head and broken mien. He busied himself instentatiously cutting up the fodder for the animals or washing them and cleaning the cattle-shed. And whenever possible he went out walking into the fields, alone, avoiding everyone.

Sometimes as he drifted away into the open he thought of the naivete of his attempt to change this world. For these people were too rooted in the elements not to be cynical about the advice given by outsiders. The whole trend of his existence seemed purposeless, without beginning or end. He and his family seemed to be drifting imperceptibly downhill. The thought of the slow decay, of the general decrepitude of the village filled him with a helpless anxiety. What could he do for them?

But then he remembered their treatment of him and he recoiled from their cruelty. The images of his father and Dayal Singh seated in the lotus seat, telling beads and mumbling prayers with their heads hung down, their lips trembling as if at the fear of death and abjectly craving a panacea for all the ills of mortality, flashed before him. They seemed base and contemptible, defeated. They did not want to think, to feel, to do anything, but relegated the responsibility for all their misfortunes, as well as their blessings, on Karma and a God who didn't exist apart from His apostles.

'If He exists, if He really can punish people for not saying prayers and violating the laws of religion, let Him come and strike me dead as I am walking along now,' he would say to himself, inspired by a sudden recrudescence of aggression. 'Where is he? Let him come and strike me dead!'

And then he waited in a blank to see if he was going to be struck down. But apart from an involuntary fear at the back of his head, he trod the paths with stony eyes and an untroubled stare, looking at the bursting ears of corn.

The fast-closed doors of winter days were opening to the spring, and the sun looked long and lingeringly on the waving green skirts of the earth like the lover in Waris

Shah's *Hir and Ranjah*. It was said that this poet had lived near Sherkot.

'Was Ranjah a real man?' Lalu wondered. 'And Hir a real cowherd woman?'

And as he saw the glad eyes of the sun winking on the farthest fields, and gleams of pink shooting from the grassy meadows at the foot of the hills above the broken stones of the river's silver, above the dense glitter of the black, ploughed earth which was now sprouting with buds, above the drone of a distant well emerging like the song of the bees through the new leaves of groves rusted by the winter, he felt a strange tenderness in him that lowered his eyes with the weight of the tears that welled under his pupils.

And he tried to picture Hir, Hir who was of a white complexion, whose frown was only the modest covering of a seductive smile, whose breasts swelled like the peaks of mountains, whose limbs were straight through the balancing of many pitchers on her heads, whose hips were broad under the navel, whose thighs, ah, the thighs, under the full skirts, the thighs where life throbbed at a higher, tempo, and the love of her that was ardent and unashamed and importunate for Ranjah.

In the light rustling of the breeze, still chilled by memories of the winter though redolent of the mixed smells exuding from the depths of the earth, the flowering seed and the shoots of grass, the thoughts of love remained a yearing, frustrated by the lack in these elements of a girl.

And in such moments a panic would seize the citadel of fanaticism in his chest. He wanted to hurt himself, to hurt someone, anyone, to destroy and disrupt and annihilate mankind, to throw ashes on the beards of all the elders, on the heads of the womenfolk. He wanted to violate all their sacred rules and superstitions, to uproot all his own feelings and trample upon the dust, to negate, deny, destroy everything, every place, everyone. But the brumming thunders of exasperation, of foiled desire and hatred and love, broke on the shores of the slippery ditches and the purpling hills, across the cawing of the crows and the twittering of sparrows and the scissored speech of an occasional parrot.

And he was left with the thud-thud of a dull ache at the back of his head and the wish to fly, to fly somewhere beyond, where he didn't know anybody, where he could do what he liked, where there was no restraint.

But, as they truly said, 'You need wings to fly with, wings or money,' and to Lalu either was equally inaccessible. He walked along with his eyes fixed on the vegetation which was pricking up its head in a variegated splendour of blooming wild flowers, among the brambles and briars and cactus through which the dust tracks led to the meadows, the marshes of the river and the slopes of the uplands.

As he wandered afar, deeper and deeper into the land and into himself, happy to hear the lark's warble, exhilarated by the fresh air creeping into his blood, running short capers with sudden shrill cries of joy and rapture, even dancing a step to see the vast acres of broad plains rolling in the lap of the heavens and singing aloud, he would suddenly wish to do something dramatic, to assert himself in the world. But in the old forest by the riverside the faint odour of the fungus growth mingled with the shade of the tangled foliage of pines and larches and banyans which were bound into a compact thick mesh of oppressing, over-powering vegetation by the intricate creepers that spread from trunk to trunk, branch to branch. The sunbeams did not enter the barriers of this intertwining tree world, and the smell of crawling insects and damp leaves immersed in shallow pools was pungent like death. And the excitements of his brain ended. He ceased to be alarmed as he felt the commonplaces of everyday existence. There was an errand he had promised to run for his mother, or hunger which bound him to the family hearth, and he lifted his steps homewards.

The air was filled with the clamour of cranes and ducks and pigeons flying in wedge-shaped droves across the reddening sky, and with the dank odour of the earth. The sharp, rasping hum of opening buds shimmered on the slanting sunbeams of golden dust that the sun was scattering about the world. And he returned with the whispered refrain of a lovesong on his lips that was half incandescent as a sigh;

now burning with the fever of frustration and now filled with the rapturous hopes of easier days to come.

The sordid familiarity of the village sobered his ecstasy however. And he would come home, eat his meal and then lie down on his bed on top of the cattle-shed, listening to the womenfolk of the neighbourhood chattering and shrieking and singing old ballads and loud ribald duets and choruses and the haunting refrains of the season's folk songs when they gathered on the top of the big barn.

And he lay, warm and dazed, embroiled in the rhythm of happiness that was on the barn-tops, so near and yet so far.

One night, he felt the curious illusion of another night, the night when he had met Maya on the cart. He could hear the mischievous lilt of her voice and he could see her open face. He knew she came every night to sing with her mother, because the quarrel between the two families had been patched up. And the memory of her voice seemed to have laid seige to his heart, stirred his blood, even become visible to his eyes. A drunken stupor came over him and his face and his body were covered with sweat.

Hai, he had lifted her in his arms, from the cart! And she had smiled at him the only time they had met face to face since the return from the fair, smiled at him in spite of her brother's insolent attack and in spite of the fact that he had been branded as a rogue for having his hair cut.

His brain reeled and a fever mounted on his brow, and he felt a thrill pass through his stomach. And before his reeling head, he could breathe her breath, the baby's smell. He could see the burning candour of her eyes, the passionate impudence with which she had mocked at Gughi. He could hear the shrill, husky voice, lowered because of her mother's remonstrance, yet brave! And as she had leant on him when he lifted her, he had felt her breasts rub past his chest, and his heart had throbbed with exultation!

Why didn't she talk to him, however, when she passed him in the village? And he felt inclined to blame her for callousness and cruelty! But as he turned on his side and felt himself lying on his bed alone he could only feel the

anguish of his yearning clutching his chest like an invisible pain and his nerves were taut till he could have cried out, screamed and begged her to come and witness his plight as he longed for her.

Then he lay flat, sniffing at the cool breeze that played about him and sought to invent an excuse, a stratagem, a joke which would give him easy access to that warm world a few yards away.

But nothing would came into his head. Only the waves of embarrassment rose within him and the knowledge that most of the peasants' wives would shy away because of his notoriety and draw their head aprons over their faces, and that he would thus have to walk away, "taking his own face". And in any case he would not be able to come in touch with Maya, who presumably sat chaperoned by her mother in an honoured place in the thick of the crowd, by the dholki.

He turned this side and that till his head ached with excitement, a dull ache which racked him till he was prostrate, wishing and praying for the gift of sleep from the very God he had spurned.

As he lay limp and lifeless, the fatigue of his body weighted with the heavy toil of the day overcame him, and he dozed off into a partial slumber. But the fantastic contortions of terrific giants quarrelled with a bellicose vision of himself walking through the gates of a garden, where a couple of stalwart door-keepers came snarling towards him like two watch-dogs at the doors of the rich. Bull-headed djinns and gnomes descended on him with huge axes in their hands to prevent him from entering the golden temple of a hundred pinnacles that stood beyond a bed of fountains, bordered by marble terraces and shady bowers full of many-coloured flowers.

XIX

THERE was only the period of one full moon to lapse before the marriage of Dayal Singh. Old Mirza, the lashless village

tailor, and two experts in gold threadwork from Manabad were engaged to come and prepare the trousseau for the bride. And Badri, the confectioner of the village, dug a hole in the courtyard of Nihalus' house for an oven, and got busy frying cakes of the finest flour and making sweets for distribution among the brotherhood, in black cauldrons full of sizzling clarified butter, while Kalu, the black dog, took up his position near him in the hall.

Lalu had to give up some of his work in the fields to come and help in the house. Someone had to superintend the tailors so that they might not steal the expensive gold thread. For his father was not vigilant enough and often dozed as he sat by them. And it was necessary to keep an eye on Badri lest he smuggle away a few of the tins of clarified butter which Guri had accumulated after strenuous toil, beating curds on many mornings.

After the first fascination of seeing the deft needles sew the threads of silver and gold in the loveliest patterns on the yellow and pink and mauve silks of head-cloths and the tussores and velvets of shirts and trousers, Lalu found the enforced leisure irksome, especially as the heat of the flames which licked the sides of the confectioner's cauldrons seeped into the congested atmosphere of the house and made it heavy and clammy and oppressive.

And besides there was so much work to do in the fields with the return of spring, and it was so much nicer to be in the fresh air.

For truly glory, glory ruled everywhere. It was such a joy to awake to the stillness of the grey dawn and walk out through the dew-drenched fields, still lying under a misted sheet, to some patch of black earth to relieve himself. It was sheer delight to bathe at a running well, groping across his body by the soft glimmer of a lingering moon and the occasional sparkle of a dying star, to see the pale-blue sky tinged with a white-red fire, the fading of the twilight and the opening of the glued eyes of the world with the glow of the morning. And then to walk back just as the cocks in the weavers' lane were beginning to crow, and the sun was rising from the hell where it had journeyed all

night, with a glittering halo round his head, more refulgent then the aura of any saint or God. It was a mild, kind sun, not so feeble as it had been before the onslaughts of the winter winds and not so hot as it would become in the summer. To walk back, one's nostrils filled with the breeze which was pregnant with the small of lush grasses and the pollen of bursting flowers, across bands of fileds turned green like strips on a carpet, and a sky clear and flawless, like glass above the mists, shining resplendently with winged life dancing and singing across it.

And even humanity, the dull humanity of the village, was full of goodwill as the peasants called to each other and to the lowing cattle from where they scattered dung.

And there was an air of recklessness and abandon about the house because of the forthcoming marriage. There was babbling, shrieking, singing and laughter, the coming and going of men, women and children—especially of women who dropped in to help the overburdened Gujri. All this compensated in some measure for the discomfort of hanging about the house restoring to him an inner sense of affection for his kith and kin and giving him back his lost sense of harmony with the world.

He worked ceaselessly—kneading the dough, sweeping the floors of the barn and the cattle-shed, chopping wood for fuel. He hurried off to the bazaar or into the fileds to lend a hand at the well, or on an errand for the tailors or Badri. He rushed back home to superintend the preparations which were advancing at a furious pace in view of the nearness of the auspicious date. For he was given innumerable odd jobs to do because he was good with his hands.

The fatigue of thes multifarious occupations crept into his bones sometimes and, to his own surprise, he found himself quite ready to lie down in the afternoon for a siesta. Since his childhood he had seldom practiced this habit even in the hotest days of the summer, except when he was very tired. But now he discovered a new delight in the afternoon snooze. When he had gone through a whole morning without a moment's break and the sun had mounted up-

wards in the sky till it tolled like a silent bell in heaven, he caught the contagion of the drowsy music in the stillness of the air. His eyes closed as he sat, and he lay down in a half-sleep on a charpai in the hall.

It was as he lay thus drowsing one day that an incident happened which was to change the whole course of his life.

Through the cool fragrance of a restful doze, he heard a chorus of voices calling out to his mother from among a discordant babble. 'The mother of Lalu, can we play the dholki in the hall and sing?'

He knew his mother was not at home. She had gone to collect some earthen pitchers from the potters, to hold the increased stores of foodstuffs that were coming into the house. And Kesari had gone to the monastery where she daily took offerings for Mahant Nandgir because the Mahant had advised that only thus would she be blessed with child. He got up reluctantly to answer.

As he come to the door he was surprised to find Maya standing there with three girls from the brotherhood. She lowered her head shyly as soon as their eyes met. And he paled to find her there, so beautiful and soft and tender she seemed, ripe like a cornstalk browned by the reflection of the sun, her breasts, her hands, her lips, her nose, her hair, her high-pitched voices, her shy movements storming his senses so that his heart beat turbulently and he stood on the brink of madness, knowing not what to say or do.

'Mother is not here,' he said after a brief pause, affecting a casual air. And he smiled with abject fear lest she turn away.

'But you can take the dholki,' he continued, 'if you promise not to break it.' And he looked away at the confectioner who sat like a greasy round ball of perspiration by the cauldron in which he was frying endless cakes.

'Where is it then, brother?' one of the girls asked.

'It is hanging on a peg in the barn,' he said. 'If you can't reach it, I will go and get it for you.'

'We can't reach it, we can't reach it,' one of the girls

shouted noisily.

'Of course we can reach it, silly,' Maya reiterated. 'Why do you want to trouble him if he won't come and get it for us? I will go and fetch it,' and saying this, she ran towards the barn.

He was stung by the reproch and ran behind her, the other girls following.

'Ohe, what is this, what is this stampede?' the tailors cried as they drew the silks safely out of the way of running feet. And Baba Nihalu shook and trembled and suddenly waking from a doze said, 'What, what! Thieves! Robbers!'

Maya did not know where the drum was hanging and stood for a moment to look round, but Lalu made straight for the peg on the left wall. By this time Maya had spotted the drum and she ran for it. But he was taller than she by inches and, lifting the drum off the peg, he held it playfully aloft.

The other girls come up too, and there followed a wild scramble for the prize and shrill squeaks of laughter. Amid querulous squeals and happy cries, Lalu struggled against he raised arms of the girls. And for a moment he stood there, the drum in his hand, triumphant, revelling in the admiration which he knew he had evoked in them by entering in their sport, and drinking his fill of the thrill of contact which hovered elusively between his face and their shining heads. Then glowing red with the hilarity of these juvenile histrionics, he relaxed, handed them the drum, and returned to the hall with them, to the tune of cynical admonitions from the old man and the tailors.

'Brother, brother, little brother, give us a key to strike on the frame,' the girls said, crowding round him again.

'I haven't a key,' he said, 'but look. There is a stone among the pebbles by the cattle-shed in the courtyard. I was playing chess with them yesterday.'

'Oh, let us play at marbles, let us play pebbles instead of the dholki, for then brother Lal Singh can join us,' Maya cried eagerly like a child. And then she turned to Lalu and asked, 'Will you play with us?'

'How,' the boy said, 'I will beat you easily.'

'Come then,' said Maya, smiling mischievously. 'And you can have the first turn too, because it is a girls' game and we don't want you to be at a disadvantage.'

Lalu took the marbles and threw them into the air. He tried to catch as many of them as he could on the back of his hand. But he could only arrest two on his knuckles and, storing one of these, he threw the second into the air and tried meanwhile to pick up as many more as he could from the ground, before catching back the marble he had thrown up. But he only picked up two more winners. He threw a marble up again and sought. This time to pick up the whole lot that lay on the ground. But in his eagerness to clear them all, he let drop the marble he had thrown up and lost his turn.

'Beaten, beaten dead,' the girls cried out.

Lalu sought to run away to the compound, but the children had now gathered round him and pulled at his clothes and held him fast. Overpowered by their sweet will and laughing at his own discomfiture, the mischievous child in him arose and swooped down on Maya's hand as she was throwing the pebbles into the air.

'Cheat, cheat. Brother Lalu is a cheat,' they shouted, while Maya fell upon him with a lovely helplessness, beating him, scratching him, digging her fists into his sides as he laughed and shook from side to side to ward her off.

But when this playful pandemonium was at its height, the Sardar Bahadur appeared in the hall.

'Maya, ni, Maya, may you die!' he shouted. 'Come away, you shameless one. What are you doing here? And as for you, scoundrel, aren't you ashamed to commit bud-mashi with my daughter like that? I shall teach you the lesson of your life.'

And the outraged landlord took hold of his daughter and dragged her away.

XX

'BABA NIHALU! Baba Nihalu. Wake up. Wake. The

policia has come!' called Jitu, the little son of Harnam Singh, as he rocked the old man who lay sound asleep in the hall the next day in the tense spring afternoon, now that the tailors had finished making the trousseau and he could relax his vigilance.

But Nihalu did not move.

'Brother Sharm Singh, Brother Dayalu, Brother Lalu,' the boy called as he ran capering towards the compound.

'What is the matter? Why are you making such a row?' said Badri the confectioner, who, sweating and hot, sat frying sweets under the sackcloth canopy he had now improvised in order to ward off the growing heat of the sun overhead.

But no one else answered. Sharm Singh was away in town on a shopping tour. Dayal Singh had gone out to the fields. Gujri and Kesari were out distributing another instalment of sweets to the brotherhood and inviting its members to the neondar ceremony when relatives offer tokens of money to the bridegroom's father. And Lalu was cutting up the fodder which he had brought from the well where Dayal Singh had left it, and could only hear the calls indistinctly, through the thud, thud of his chopper.

'Baba Nihalu! Baba Nihalu!' the boy cried, running back to the old man again without answering the confectioner.

The old man arose suddenly, startled and red-eyes, with the name of Wah Guru on his lips.

'Napoo Singh, the poolcia,' said the boy in answer to Nihal's stare.

'Oh, rest in peace, son,' said the old man. 'Is there no sleep in your eyes?' He was only half awake and thought the boy was scared of being alone in the tense hum of the hot afternoon when most people were asleep or absorbed in work.

'The poolcia,' the child said, pointing to the door.

'The boy is right,' came a voice from outside which the old man recognized as that of Napoo Singh. 'Why don't you wake up? Come and bring that thieving son of yours, Lalu, here to answer the summons, Baba Nihalu.'

Old Nihalu blinked his eyes as if to make sure that he

was not dreaming, opened them wide, sat up, caught hold of the rosary wrapped round his neck, jumped off the charpai and went soft-footed towards the door.

'Ohe hurry, ohe hurry and bring the boy. I am not your servant that I should stand waiting in the sun till you have made up your mind,' said Napoo with an impatient air, as if he didn't like the job he was doing. 'Come out,' he added, 'before the landlord or the tehsildar comes on the scene, and hand over the boy to me quietly.'

'What is the matter, son?' said Nihalu, coming up to the policeman.

'Where is he, Lalu, that thief, you old wretch?' said Napoo Singh, half bullying, half kind. 'Where is he? Fetch him out, as I have the handcuffs ready for him.'

'But tell me, what is the talk, son?' asked Nihalu, courteous and affectionate. 'Explain to me, what is the talk?'

'Ohe, where is Lalu?' shouted the policeman. The sound of the words travelled like horror through the house and all the other houses in the alley.

The confectioner who had been frying sweets in the compound, the servant woman who had been helping to do the innumerable small jobs incidental to the preparations for the oncoming marriage, the children who had been playing hide and seek with Jitu behind the wood fuel that lay stored by the cattle-shed, all rushed towards the hall.

'What is his crime that you have come here? roared the old man furiously. 'What has he done?' and he looked back at the whispering crowd in the courtyard to see if his son was there.

'I will soon tell you what he has done. You go and fetch him,' answered the policeman in a softer voice, now afraid of old Nihalu's well-known temper.

At that instant Lalu came rushing into the hall, scattering the people before him.

'There he is, there he is,' shouted voices from among the people who had gathered in the lane behind the policeman.

'Catch him, ohe Napoo, and handcuff the rascal,' came the genteel voice of the landlord, and the Sardar Bahadur

appeared at the corner of the lane.

'What is this about handcuffs?' said Lalu indignantly. And scanning the faces of the crowd in the alley, he repeated : 'What is all this about handcuffs?'

'Catch him,' ordered the landlord peremptorily as he approached, beturbaned, but clad only in a pair of ceremonial cotton shorts, shirt and noisy wooden sandals.

'You dare!' said Lalu, struggling to control himself as the fear of the policeman shook his legs in spite of the hardening of his will.

'Catch him, ohe Napoo Singh, and handcuff the scoundrel, I tell you,' said the Sardar Bahadur, irritated and emphatic, the words almost muffled in the bush of his beard.

'But what has he done?' asked Nihalu in a voice that trembled and throbbed with his rising rage. 'What has he done that you dare come riding on at us like this?'

Lalu stood, nerves taut, trying to stifle the noise of his throbbing heart and anxiously looking for a clue to this strange, uncalled-for threat. But the waves of fury that swept over him from head to foot prevented him from thinking. He felt himself breaking into particles of sweat and dried of all content, wasted and weak above his failing legs.

'What has he done?' roared Nihalu, shaking on his feet. 'Look, people, take the name of Wah Guru. What injustice! What terrible, uncalled-for cruelty is being perpetrated!'

'The wretch stole three bundles of fodder from our field and brought them home,' said the landlord in a tone in which pride quarrelled for mastery with spiteful delight. 'I had heard of his thefts before and today I didn't have siesta but, at great inconvenience, stood under cover of a tree and saw the wicked one cutting the grass. And two men on my estate have seen him bringing the fodder home. And that fodder is, I know, in your cattle-shed. Napoo Singh here will take him to the lock-up at the Tehsil Thana. I can prove my charge when the time comes, in court. Arrest him, ohe Napoo. These are my orders.' The Sardar Bahadur's voice was cool and deliberate.

'Ohe, did you do that?' said Nihal Singh, turning towards his son livid with rage. The accusation of theft implied a greater humiliation to the proud farmer than anything else could have done.

'Of course he did,' the landlord said.

'It is a lie. "Ask the truth of the story seven times and then believe it",' Lalu said in a tight-stretched tone. 'I have just been chopping up the greens now. The fodder was lying at our well where Dayal Singh always leaves it. I thought he had bought it for our cattle from one of the landlord's servants as he often does. And as for my cutting it from the landlord's field, it is the dirtiest lie . . . .'

'Has a thief ever confessed his crime?' asked Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, chuckling sardonically to impress the people so that his belly gurgled like a pitcher. He was glad that the boy admitted that the fodder came from his estate.

'I am not a thief, I tell you, and I shall break your head if you utter that word again!' raved Lalu.

'I saw you myself,' said the landlord, 'so restrain your abusive tongue and don't deny it. Just accept the handcuffs and walk away quietly. We will decide who is in the right, in the courts of law.'

And he turned towards the crowd now assembling behind him in increasing numbers and held out his hand in an elaborate gesture of injured innocence.

'Oh you cowardly, lying hound,' shouted Lalu, infuriated by the landlord's hypocrisy and he stepped forward towards the threshold with his right arm lifted and his skin stretched hard to attack.

'Hai, hai, ni, hai, hai! look what he is up to!' came the voice of the landlord's wife in a hysterical shrill wail. 'The thief threatening the sheriff. Look, vay all you folk. I call you to witness each and everyone. Hear the tale of his crimes. At first this lecher catches hold of my daughter and attempts to spoil her. Then he goes thieving into our fields. And now the impertinence, that he should want to strike the head of our house, the Sardar Bahadur. That such an inauspicious day should threaten the dignity of our honour.

If only my son was here, he would teach the bandit a lesson for daring to lift his hand. How can he so forget his status as to talk to the head of our house like that?' And she modestly drew her apron over her well-oiled hair.

'This is a frame-up,' roared Lalu, turning to his father. 'It is a plot. They have invented this tale about the stolen fodder to revenge themselves on me because they found Maya playing here with me in the hall the other day. But by the oath of Guru Nanak and all the Gurus, I am innocent! I haven't done anything wrong!'

'Go, lecher,' shrieked the landlord's wife, rushing forward. 'I myself saw you attempting to spoil my daughter on top of the hay cart when we were on the way to the fair. Rogue, you went debauching in the town with all the scum of the village. The tale of your evil deeds has been growing blacker and blacker. It is a disgrace that such a criminal should be among us!'

She flung herself indignantly round and panted wildly at the cluster of peasants, hiding her young face the while

'Whose daughter is safe from the advances of this eater of his masters?' she expostulated. 'And whose son is immune from his evil influence?'

She turned again to Lalu, her face distorted by anger and malice. 'Don't people know you came back with your sacred hair cut?' she yelled. 'Don't people know who you are?'

'Catch him and handcuff him without any more talk, ohe Napoo,' ordered the landlord as Lalu stared ahead, tense and rigid but ominously silent.

'You touch him and see,' said Nihalu, raising a sturdy fist. 'You fraud who come to harass honest folk by day and perpetrate your own scandals in the darkness of night. They do not wring the neck of the thief who steals cucumbers, and my sons are honest and even my cattle won't stray into your illgotten fields. It is all a misunderstanding. We have our pride, we have our dignity, and our name is breathed with a prayer and not a curse. You think you will ruin my family both inside and outside the courts, you heartless impostor. You have usurped my land and now you

want to send my son to jail. But you forget that you are dealing with an old soldier and not weaklings. Just you touch him!'

'He will get pulled about who fares in others' quarrels, so you keep out of it,' said the Sardar Bahadur, shifting nervously on his feet as he felt Nihalu's thrust strike home. And turning to the police sepoy sternly, pale in the face, he averted his eyes from his enemies and half turned towards the crowd who were whispering and nudging one another and hanging anxiously on every word of the dispute.

'This is a sad business,' said Napoo Singh apologetically to Nihalu, 'but what can I do?' And he took a step towards Lalu.

'You dare touch him,' burst Nihalu and stretched his arm before his son.

Napoo stopped. He was a mild, sober policeman whose professional position had always quarrelled with his good nature and general amicability. And now as often he was torn between duty and kindness.

'Arrest him, Napoo, why do you hesitate?' said the landlord. 'You have got the summons. One or two faults may pass, but the third . . . .'

And as Napoo still halted, he rushed forward like a rhinoceros, parting the crowd of spectators who were pale and frightened as they watched this grim battle of wills.

'Come, brother,' said Napoo, and he took two steps towards Lalu and patted his shoulder.

'Keep your hands off my body! shouted Lalu, swerving round like a tiger. 'And talk to me like a man.'

His face was glistening with a consuming urge to retaliate. His breath heaved to throw over the weight of restraint.

'Catch him,' ordered the landlord finally. And his voice broke as he gritted the phrase between clenched teeth.

'Just you touch me, swine, and you will see,' said Lalu in a thick voice.

'Careful, son,' said Nihalu, stretching his arm towards Lalu and blinking uneasily, his mouth weakening with a mingling of fear and affection.

'Leave me, Bapu,' said Lalu, and he spoke with a new pride and dignity which seemed to steel his heart before this uncouth attack. 'They have raised a false rumour in the village about me and Maya. And I know all the tricks that this old fox is up to. I got the fodder from the well. And if Dayal Singh didn't buy it, it must have been left there by these enemies of ours. And now they have got a summons for my arrest. But I won't go to the lock-up, summons or no summons. That they should stoop to such lowness, to bewilder the people into believing such lies.'

His voice broke as he stood, his anger weakening him and threatening his determination.

'And all because the Sahib made me the leader of the scouts here,' he added in a huskier tone, 'and this old land-snatcher is afraid we might have influence!'

'You think you are clever, don't you, ohe?' granted the landlord's malicious accents, ' "lust, fire and theft can never be concealed".' I have had enough of your insolence. Not only are you a thief but a rogue and a scoundrel with no respect for your elders. You have abused me and insulted me and I will summons you for that as well as for your theft. And you are coming with us.'

His voice was rising to a harsh roar which seemed to shake his whole frame. He shook his fist in rage and fury as Lalu took a step backward and swept his adversary from head to foot with a coolly appraising glance, as though he were measuring his own simple strength against all the evil and malevolence that was breaking through the mask of piety and dignity which habitually concealed it.

As he gazed at the wretched, sweating face, distorted by passion, for a moment a feeling of detachment possessed him. This heated brawling did not seem to concern him. It was all so stupid and vulgar and sordid. And a puzzled look crept into his eyes even as a faint nervous smile played on his lips.

But the landlord mistook this awkward expression for a gesture of defiance and, losing all control, he leaped forward in a savage spurt of activity.

Lalu started back in fear.

'Get away, you foul cur, go back home,' he said, and backed away before the bull-like charge of the landlord.

But Harbans Singh's pampered limbs were unused to such exertion, especially as he wore a pair of wooden sandals. And as he came towards Lalu, he slipped and tottered for a moment and then fell, splashing the mud of the drain on himself and others.

There were frightened murmurs among the crowd and a few of the women raised their voices invoking the gods and saints in shrill lamentation.

Lalu stared at the grovelling figure for a moment and then, as Napoo the policeman stepped forward nervously and bent awkwardly over the landlord, he was seized with a sudden panic and turned and fled.

'Ohe son, where are you going? Don't go! It will be all right,' Nihalu called.

'Ohe, what has happened? What is the matter?' said Harnam Singh a few moments later, holding out his hand to check the boy's impetuous flight as he encountered him in the lane on his return from the fields.

'Nothing is the matter,' said Lalu, slowing his steps with instinctive deference in order to give an answer to the older man's inquiry. ' "On that hound's head rest the troubles of your stable". I won't live in this cursed village . . . I . . .'

But his voice choked. He could not continue his explanation and, raising his hands to his head in a gesture of despair, he turned away, halted once more and then raced off down the lane.

'Ohe, come and listen to my talk. Ohe, come! Ohe, stop!' he heard his father entreating after him.

Harnam Singh thought that the boy was only being temperamental after a quarrel with someone in the family which would be patched up when Lalu had had a walk in the fields. So he didn't stop him or try to bring him back.

XXI

HE had walked seven miles out of the reach of the landlord, the policeman and the village, and was entering Manabad. And still he could not shake off the shapeless, sporadic bursts of panic that disturbed him after prolonged spells of silence which set his face into the droop of an inconsequential despair.

He had sought, even in the face of the self in him which looked on, to dramatize his emotions. And he had shaken his fist at fate and mumbled curses on the whole lot of them, including his parents. And he had worked himself into a rage, so that the waves of indignation swept over him and sent him rushing through the scorching heat of a spring which was growing into summer.

But then these stirrings of pain had lapsed and he had recognized himself, a pitiful figure, walking along the dusty highway alone, in the oppressive, muzzy windless solitude of the land. As he had trudged on thus, he had felt emptied of all content except for an occasional wave of nausea which shook his entrails and sent a dry weakness from the roof of his mouth down to his throat. And then he smacked his tongue on his lips and uttered a tcha, spoke a word or whimpered a monosyllable.

Here and there, when a whiff of air, cooled a brimming ditch of water, came from a grove, stirring the tufts of the shrubs, he had sighed and said to himself : 'It seems as if I was born to suffer and be sad.' The calves of his legs ached with weakness, and his heart drummed now rapidly, now in a series of protracted beats.

'Why didn't I strike the dog?' he burst out as he recalled how Harbans Singh had come threatening towards his father and told him to keep out of it. 'Why didn't I shout, abuse or say something to teach him? Why didn't I do something to deny the charge, to show that it was a frame-up? Why, oh, why?'

He had reiterated such protests to himself with a burning, flashing face that smarted with sweat.

And then he had melted again and trudged along dazed, with neither love, nor hatred, nor joy, nor pain in his heart.

As he passed by the orchards of fruit trees which stood interspersed between the bungalows of Sahibs, rich merchants, lawyers and landholders, and came to the outskirts of the city, he felt easier.

But the sight of a leisurely gathering of respectable citizens by a tennis court which stood clean and fresh, ready for a game, filled him with envy and he was irritated that he, a rustic, would always remain an outsider to that world.

And further ahead, when the signalman by the railway line shut the wooden gates across the road as a train was about to pass, and he couldn't cross at once, he took that to be an insult.

But as, after the doors were unbarred, he resumed his steps and turned his back on the signalman, he was angry with himself for being impatient and irritable. 'I am tired,' he said.

But the gates of the city were not far away now. He had reached the broken, black hovels of the cobblers' bazaar under the shadow of Raja Ram Saran Das's magnificent old house which was used as a caravanserai and wrestling ring. He made an effort to harden his will, to steel himself to hasten and cover that little stretch.

But even though he promised himself a feed at the first cook-shop inside the gate, now that he had become aware of his fatigue, he couldn't go on. Instead a panicky feeling arose in belly and gave him a distaste for all the sights and sounds of the city that were beginning to crowd round upon him, the bearded, unbearded, turbaned and turbanless, capped and kulahed men, long, short, lean and fat, the sweet-stalls, the rag-shops, the shoe-shops, the barbers' saloons, the neighing horses in the cart-stand, the hinneying asses on the road, and the rattling phaetons and tongas and yekkas which scattered everyone and everything aside in their mad rush.

He made for the shadow of a well on the terrace where

a Brahmin with a caste mark on his brow sat pouring water with a brass jug into the palms of the thirsty walkers who were queueing up. He mopped his face and opened his eyes wide to the cool air that blew across from the water in a cattle trough near-by. He felt a throbbing in his temples and at the back of his head now that he had stopped walking.

'Your turn, ohe, rustic,' the Brahmin called as Lalu stood set in a thoughtless stare into nothingness.

He took the reproach wthout offence, and without looking at the Brahmin lest he should find him repulsive and hate him, he went up and received the water on his palms from where the Brahmin was pouring it, so that the jug should not touch Lalu. First he washed his hands and then he cupped them before his bent head, drank, edged away and belched with satisfaction.

And then for the first moment he realized that he had nowhere to go.

He took his hand to the upper edge of his tehmet and felt the rupee that he had luckily tied up there in the morning when he had gone shopping to the Bazaar. At least he could eat with it. But how long could a rupee last? He could go to the room of Amar Singh at the hostel perhaps. But the police would be hot on his trail and Amar's rooms would be the first place they would go to search.

He stood perplexed, looking at the hostile world about him. He had nowhere to go. He had no money and the colour of the world seemed to have changed suddenly. Before him now stood a darkling plain full of alien, phantasmagoric shapes, strange and removed, detached from him and from each other.

'Come, come, brave men! Come and see the beautiful lands beyond the black waters! Come, brave lads, sprung from the loins of tigresses! Come and serve in the army of His Majesty, the King-Emperor!' the loud, raucous shouts of Havildar Lehna Singh fell on his ears.

It was a curious omen. But he wasn't superstitious. He had heard the man declaim at the fair some months ago

and laughed at him. He couldn't go and listen to his brawling.

The army though, the army, in the army—'If I became a soldier in the army, I would become an employee of the Sarkar and the police couldn't lay hands on me'—the thought suddenly exhilarated him. 'And the money I could earn in the army may help to pay off our debts.'

He paused for the barest moment to consider the prospect. But already he was inclined to it with the warmth of hope. Already he was elated with the sense of rising, winged and free, from the fear of being alone and homeless. But he wanted to stop and think again. No, he must not, he felt. For if a doubt crept into his mind, if a thought.

With the violence of an urge that had taken possession of him wholly, he ran from where he stood towards the ring where Havildar Lehna Singh stood on a platform with a measuring rod in his hand.

Once there he wanted to rush into the arena and offer himself at once, for fear the police might have followed him already and might arrest him just before he was comparatively safe. Actually he wouldn't be quite safe till he was enlisted regularly, and the Havildar would certainly give him up to the police if they came to demand him. Still he would be safer in the Havildar's hand, because there was just a chance that the man couldn't get recruits easily and wouldn't want to yield him up. But he must not betray himself by hurry. The man was still bawling at the top of his voice, and Lalu's heart drummed, his face paled, and he looked this side and that furtively, smiling a weak smile and trying to assume a casual, ordinary air the while.

'His Majesty the King-Emperor is the Karnel of the whole Indian army, and even wears a turban sometimes to show that he is like all of us. I had the privilege of shaking hands with him myself at the Delhi Durbar in nineteen-eleven. And I tell you there is nothing more glorious than to stand with all the ranks, with the chosen sepoy heroes, Jimadars, Subedars, Laftens, Captans, Majers, Karnels, Jarnels and Maharajas, the Jangi Lat and the Badshah himself, on one plain, and shout hurrah! And in peace time you

get eleven rupees a month clear, with rations, khaki uniforms, mufti of white cotton, as well as all the pleasures. And in war you win medals and glory and your pay is increased, with overseas allowance, and sent to your village, and you see new lands into the bargain. Now what more do you want, rustics and good-for-nothing scoundrels? What more could you want than to be ordered with all the ranks and charge up to the enemy, sons of tigresses, charge with the name of your prophets and martyrs of faith on your lips, clamouring like a flock of vultures and tear the enemy to pieces?'

The Havildar turned his face up to the heaven for a moment and took a deep breath, and Lalu wanted to take that opportunity to rush into the arena. But the copious flow of the man's rhetoric was not interrupted long enough.

'The angrezi Sarkar has given you canals : the angrez sahibs have built roads and railways; the Sarkar gives you good pay and encourages you to keep up the glorious traditions of your heroic ancestors. Come then, come scions of warriors, Rajputs, come, brave Sikh lions, come, the sons of the Prophets, come and fight side by side with the angrez sahibs for the defence of your King-Emperor and your country. Come and you might see the wondrous lands across the black waters, where there are beautiful memnies, houris. Come and show your bravery. Come and wear the king's uniform, smoke cigarettes, drink free rum, eat angrezi sweets and chocolates. Come and see pictures that walk, and ride in ships that are like cities afloat on the waters : come and win medals, grants of land and money untold.'

The Havildar paused for breath again and was going to resume his peroration when Lalu, who had waited for the opportunity, burst in, his mind only dimly aware of the existence of other human beings, and intent on his vision, as if he were racing down a long low hill to the mirage of some terrible azure pool in which he would drown himself for ever and for ever.

'Shabash! Shabash!' cried the Havildar. 'You have

redeemed the honour of this town. You have made the womb of your mother thrice blessed. You have proved the potency of your father's seed. Wah! Wah! What a beautiful specimen of manhood you are, too!—' And he descended from the platform, still shouting at the top of his voice, though Lalu blushed for shame ; ' Brave lad, braver than all the heroes of Hindustan.'

The necessity of measuring Lalu's height interrupted the flood of compliments for a moment. But having adjusted the rod and lowered the shuttle over the boy's head, he announced : 'Five foot ten : Wah! Wah! What a marvel! What a splendid specimen of manhood! Now.'

He was going to make Lalu's emergence into the arena the text of another long speech, when the boy shouted, 'Acha, I am all right, there is another fellow there.'

' Wah! Wah! Wah!' the Havildar said, and began to measure the new recruit. 'Wah! Wah!'

Once the ice had been broken, once one recruit had offered himself, another and another, a third, a fourth and a fifth man forward.

XXII

THE Recruiting Havildar was in the habit of taking the sons of tigresses he collected in or near Manabad direct to the regiments. He told the new batch that he was going to take them to the 68th Rifles at Ferozepur cantonment, by the Mail train in the evening, get them passed as fit for service and return the day after to gather more sons of tigresses. He took the seven cubs he had mustered under his measuring rod and led them to Manabad Station, gave them a good feed at a cook-shop on the Station Road, bought their tickets and even wangled a safe conduct for them to the platform with the help of a policeman several minutes before the train was due to arrive.

The boys began to feel very happy and enthusiastic after they had fed heartily on three different meat and vegetable dishes and rice and chapatis. Already they felt a

new dignity had accrued to them as they strolled about on the platform and looked patronizingly on the civilians still penned up in the third-class waiting-room. For, being peasants, most of them had never enjoyed these luxuries. And they looked forward to the prospect of all the free meals to come in the kitchens of His Majesty's barracks and the wonderful uniforms they would get.

The generosity of the Havildar's bluff and hearty manner, and the treats which he gave them, had convinced them that his promises would be fulfilled as soon as they got to the cantonment.

Only Lalu was rather glum and reticent. Wearied by the stress of events, he lay down on the long luggage bunk which the Havildar in the name of the Sarkar had usurped for his tiger cubs in the packed third-class compartment, and doze with the song of the train in his ears and the fear of the police in his heart.

The layers of early summer heat that rose from the congestion of bodies in the carriage above the piles of sacks and trunks and bundles to the corners of the ceiling over the bunks almost choked Lalu. He lay stupefied, struggling to catch a breath of fresh air by bending his head down to face the open windows. But as the train rushed deeper into the night in its escape from Manabad Station, the atmosphere cooled and he fell into a half-sleep. The vision of floors littered with cowdung, and those cursed chopped-up greens that had been his undoing, alternated with the ghost of the landlord, a vivid flush on his patchy face, scorning the pale, melancholy visage of his father.

And then his mother, Harnam Singh, and Sharm Singh, Kesari and Dayal Singh were drawn by the threads of memory before his eyes, distorted by distance and a feverish pulse, shaken and rocked on the curve of a furious and disquietening rhythm. His heart throbbed madly and his face burnt as he shrank back into himself.

And as he judged each incident of his bygone life, dragged the broken ends of the incident again for fresh deliberation and luxuriated in the rub of pain, obstinately refusing

to forget the donkey-ride in particular, insisting on it with contracting fists, his sleep prolonged itself into a wearying agitation. For one moment he thought of Maya and saw a shadow of the weakness he had felt when he had played marbles with her. And as he stared at her, full of the madness, the joy and abandon, which had led to this sudden disaster, he realized that the something which had happened to him then, the something that Maya had done to him, would never happen again.

He believed that he could kill those who had wronged him and sent him away, kill but never forgive.

And the blood oozed in his veins and his burning lips hardened into a grim despair and he called out in his soul, 'Kill, kill, you should have killed them, struck a blow, kill —kill and kill again . . . and never have cared for what came afterwards!'

And then a reminiscence of the first time that he had looked at her came penetrating into his limbs, making him shudder and break with twitches which were like lightning flashes. And he wanted to crawl towards her, to stretch his arms in the emptiness as if she were there. He wanted to hold her near him. He felt he was kissing her cheeks as he lay his own mouth on his own hand till his throat burst and a stifled sigh escaped from his lips like a moan and shaped itself into the broken edges of a verse current about the heroine of Waris Shah's epic. 'Hire, ni Hire, how your love has bandied me about in . . . the world. Hire, ni Hire!'

The truth of the lines crept into him with a vague fear of the outside world, and he held his breath as he tried to imagine what was in store for him and remembered the police. His heart fluttered in the throes of a suspense as if his enemies were here or would be waiting at one of the stations on the way or at the destination. But he rocked to and fro and sought to quieten his unrest. The pain, the pain of the world was terrible.

Then he lay and shut his eyes tight and playfully numbered the cows walking through a gate. The pitch nig ht of sleep descended on his eyes and he slept soundly, only

turning as the train stopped and sinking into the blackness of rest with his eyes unopened and glued together.

Towards dawn the air of the plains became colder and he shivered through the inadequate covering of his homespun tunic and tehmet. He rose and sat huddled on the luggage bunk overlooking the crowded compartment.

A fellow-recruit was singing a song near him. And the gaiety of the rude remarks which the peasants, who squeezed their giant frames against each other and against the superior city folk and the mountains of sacks and chests and bundles, heaped around the Havildar who was lying sprawled on a whole bunk, lifted the weight of his unquenched sleep a little.

For a while he peeped out through the opposite windows. But there was no movement in the open and the miles of maturing harvests interspersed with green groves stood languishing in the half-dark beyond the high-pitched undulations of the storming train, pleasant and remote.

'Is it his father's train that he won't even pull his legs up a bit and give one a little more space?' an irascible Muhammadan said from where he stood puffing at his hubble-bubble.

'Ohe, don't say it so loudly, or he will hear,' said a city man. 'He is a sepoy.'

'A Holdar,' a Sikh peasant corrected.

'Holdar or no Holdar, my child has been crying all night as I have sat here cooped up like a hen with the babe almost swooning in my arms,' protested a woman.

'He is a servant of the Sarkar,' the city man said. 'Don't disturb him. He and his herd are getting out at the next stop, for we have already passed Kasur.'

'Eater of his masters!' the woman fumed, and turned her face away.

'Can I take the child here, mother?' Lalu said after a pause.

The woman was surprised since she knew that he was one of the usurpers of the bunks from the ordinary passengers. She looked at him with open eyes, then said, 'No

son, there is no talk.'

'Aren't you with this brute, though?' the Muhammadan with the hubble-bubble asked.

'Han,' said Lalu. ' "He who loses his jewels has to join up with the thieves". I was hungry and joined the army.'

'Your own doing, brother, your own reward,' said the Sikh peasant.

And the compartment laughed.

'But he is stubborn,' said the woman, 'this thief!'

'Don't say it so loudly,' warned the city man. 'He'll hear.'

'He is deaf, the eater of his masters,' the woman replied.

'Woe to you and your child if he is awake, for he is not deaf,' said the city man.

'Who is more deaf than the man who hears but will not speak?' said the woman.

And there was more laughter.

'Let me have a look at the baby, anyhow,' said the Sikh peasant.

'Acha, hold him,' said the woman, giving him the bundle of flesh swathed in clothes, and she proceeded to unpack a bag.

'Come, ohe, lion, come, my son, come, my son, come, my jewel, my ruby, my precious,' the Sikh sang as he took the child.

'Take this,' said the woman, offering the city man a sugar plum. 'You too take.' she said, offering another to Lalu. 'The child's grandmother gave them on the ceremony of his showing the first teeth, may he live long.'

The city man accepted the plum easily, but Lalu was slightly overcome by shame and said : 'But mother, don't do all this khaichal.'

'Do take, take, all of you,' she said, 'even he, this mountain which has nearly crushed me out of existence.' And she proceeded to thrust a plum in the mouth of the Havildar. Lehna Singh got up, spitting, shouting, rubbing his eyes and protesting.

'I was only sweetening your mouth, which smells of

garlic!' the woman shouted.

There were peals of laughter and the whole compartment sweated with the heartiness of a rocking happiness.

'Ohe, there, we are crossing the Sutlej,' the Havildar said. 'Get ready all of you boys. The science of duty—perfection—comes from practice,' he added authoritatively. And he began to shake the sleeping recruits.

'God be thanked,' said the woman. 'This will be the end of a black journey.'

The compartment smiled now at every gesture she made, but the Havildar was too thick-skinned to notice her irony.

Lalu felt as if he could forgive the world everything after the cordiality of the people in the train during the last lap of the journey. And he felt almost sentimental when the train raced over the few miles from Ferozepur city to the cantonment station and the time came for parting from the jolly crowd.

'The science of duty—perfection—comes from practice.' The injunction flickered with meaning through his mind as, after many warm greetings, he alighted and walked out with the other recruits behind the Havildar.

The blue haze of hyacinths in the stretch of a field by the carriage stand, where they waited for a tonga, carried his mind back to the approach of Nandpur. The beds of cowslips that yellowed a meadow at the foot of a red hill reminded him of the meadows where the cattle of his village grazed. Two crows cawing outside a confectioner's stall by the station reminded him of the swarms over the trees of his father's well. And there was the sun, the same resplendent sun that had emerged every morning on the everlasting blue sky of Nandpur. There it was, rather startling today and new because the smell of the air was different, but otherwise just like the sun in the village! Even the lights and shades of the morning were the same, and the wild plants, the smell of grass, the fragrance of the earth and the horrid beauty! How beautiful was the earth, but how much pain there was in it!

But no, there was something different. The whiffs of horse-dung smell and the lines of barracks beyond that metalled road and a few orange-coloured bungalows by the side of more straight red barracks. And there was a uniformed angrezi soldier on guard with a rifle in his hand.

The boy's heart was fascinated by the sight of the gora. It thrilled with an anxious beat of nervous expectation and exhilaration.

XXIII

'THERE'S rarely a full cup that doesn't break or spill over.' And hopes which run high are nearly always shattered. For each moment of time which anticipates the coming of a perfect heaven stands on the brink of a dangerous precipice.

The recruits had to wait about outside the office of the 68th Rifles for the convenience of Babu Khushi Ram, the company clerk, whose duty it was to inspect the newcomers. And the Babu was still invisible behind the yellow and blue chic, though the Havildar had been in three times and had then sent an office orderly to remind him of the arrival of his bunch of warriors, or rather his litter of tiger cubs.

Lalu was again disturbed by the fear which had lurked in him since yesterday that at any moment while he waited for the formal enlistment the police might come and take him. While the curve of his curiosity sought to adjust itself to the exalted efficiency of this world where uniformed soldiers with rifles on their shoulders were parading on the maidans to strange shouts of orders, and trays of files were borne in and out of mysterious office rooms in which sat the Sahib logs, his thoughts kept struggling with the blind hope that all would be well. And he sat groping, open-eyed, now in the drowsy shadows of the office verandah, now in the torrential glare of the sun which was rising high outside.

At length a thin little being emerged from the office, his

hollow cheeks frowning under the weight of his bushy eyebrows and drooping, heavy moustachios, dressed in a faded khaki tunic and tight white cotton pyjamas with a pen adjusted on his ear, and greeted the Havildar with a feigned air of bonhomie.

Sat Sri Akal, Havildar, what have you brought now? These!' And, after looking at the recruits, he continued, interspersing English with Punjabi, 'By Jove! Sardar Owl Singh, they are babies! They look as if they had hardly finished sucking the milk from the teats of their mothers' breasts.' And then he paused, stiffened and worked himself up into an attitude of authority. 'Really, what is the use of your spending the money of the Sarkar bringing them here when you know that they are going to be rejected?'

'Come, come, Babu Khushi Ram,' said Lehna Singh, brushing his beard nervously and attempting to be good-humoured so that the Babu's reception of him might not create an unfavourable impression on the recruits whom he had lured with his bellicosity. 'Leave that talk. You are not much of a warrior yourself, yar, even though you keep a long moustache like a Rajput. You couldn't lift a rifle, brother. And you would faint with cowardice if you were ever to come face to face with the enemy. You take care of your pen. You know how to balance it on your ear. That's about all. You don't know the qualities that go to make a soldier! So don't spoil my business by speaking in your tish-mish, tish-mish anything bad to the Doctor Sahib.'

'Acha, acha,' said the Babu, laughing at the Havildar's mockery.

'Listen to my talk, listen, Khuski Ram!' said Lehna Singh, playing on the clerk's name and perverting it to mean 'dry as dust', as he led the clerk aside with an affectionate smile, squeezing him with his left arm. And he put his hand on the Babu's hand as if to warm it.

'My name is not Khuski Ram,' the Babu said.

'A joke's a joke,' said the Havildar. 'Come, listen to my talk.'

'It is neither Udho's taking, nor Madho's giving, brother, that is the true talk, and the share you give me is not enough,'

said the Babu loudly, without much pretence at a disguise. 'To get these boys passed fit for service in the army is not an easy task. The Divisional Headquarters are getting very strict, and the Army orders from Simla—'

'Oh, leave the kind of talk, Babu Khushi Ram,' said Lehna Singh. 'You know very well how difficult it is to get good recruits. But look,' he continued, turning and pointing to Lalu Singh, 'there is a gem of a man, a diamond, a ruby among men. And isn't it an extraordinary thing that he is called Lal Singh, a real ruby!'

'I don't know anything about that,' the Babu rejoined tersely. 'I only know that the Karnel Sahib complained about the men you brought in last time. And these boys look half-starved.'

'Acha, acha, let us present them, at least.'

Then he whispered, 'You can take whatever you put into my hand, for you will never find a jat's fist contracting, nor his heart. Now are you happy?'

'No, that is not right—but there is Doctor Sahib,' said the Babu, breaking off and shuffling his feet to attention as he stood, his hand to his forehead in a military salute which looked oddly incongruous with his general civilian air.

'Salaam, Sahib,' the Havildar shouted, clicking his heels and casually saluting. For though Dr. Puri was clad in the uniform of the Royal Army Medical Corps with a captain's three stars and the letters I.M.S. on his shoulders, and though he threw his B.S.A. push-bike to a waiting orderly like any officer, he was an Indian. And although he was one of a very small band of natives admitted into the Imperial Service, his short stocky figure with its dark, round face put him to unflattering comparison in the eyes of the soldiers with the tall, well-built imposing British officers. Besides this, he was the victim of that sense of inferiority which the frustrations imposed by the British on the Indians encourages among the natives!

'Ask them to take their clothes off,' said the doctor to the Havildar in Punjabi, and he swept the faces of the recruits with a hard glance as he stood rather superciliously, his hands on his hips.

The boys began to take their tunics off without the slightest trace of awkwardness, Lalu stripping more quickly than the rest. His heart beat eagerly as the moment when he would escape finally from the fear of being arrested came nearer. Some of the recruits bent over their tehmets in suspense with a look in their eyes which seemed to ask : 'Should we undress under the waist too.' But the Havildar was engaged in private conversation with Captain Puri and Babu Khushi Ram, and none of the boys dared to raise a voice.

Lal Singh felt a slight sense of resentment now, as he realized that the 'whisper into my ear so that I may whisper into yours' talk that was going on beyond him was the unscrupulous bargaining for shares in the money that would accrue from the sale of their bodies to the Sarkar.

Outside, the bare earth, between the office and the barracks, was burning a richer brown under the sun and exhaling a soft haze in which everything swooned except the chirping sparrows searching for food among the stones, the cooing pigeons in invisible nests, and the grass-hoppers, hopping from spot to spot. And he began to feel oppressed through the endless procrastination, the ache of anxiety stirring the nausea of hunger in his belly and quickening his senses to the tedium of each long moment.

The arrangements between the Doctor Sahib, the Babu and the Havildar settled, the Doctor Sahib drew the thongs of the stethoscope from his pocket and, garlanding himself with the red rubber tubes, advanced towards the recruits. Babu Khushi Ram and the Havildar followed behind him rather cowed and disgruntled. But he had hardly walked up to the first recruit, who was an angular young Muhammadan with sore eyes and large flat feet, when he heard a rattling tonga come to halt with a sudden jerk on the metalled road.

'This man's eyes are bad,' he said to Lehna Singh, casually turning round to see the tonga. And then averting his gaze he continued the examination by applying the stethoscope to the first recruit's chest.

'There is a thief among these men,' called a police

sergeant, jumping out of the carriage with the swagger characteristic of the Indian policeman. 'Bring the handcuffs, Dhan Gopal and Dost Muhammad,' he shouted to the two constables who still sat in the back seat of the tonga.

'Whom do you want, Farid Khan?' said Lehna Singh, turning towards the police sergeant, whom he knew from previous experience, his lion's face paling above the mane of his brave black beard.

Farid Khan, a small, thin-lipped, brittle-eyed skeleton of a muhammadan Rajput with long plaits of hair hanging stiffly over his cylindrical neck, lengthened by the pointed kulah beneath his turban, drew a paper from the upper pocket of his uniform, whose loose fit is the one thing that gives the police a sense of inferiority before the soldiers of the Indian army. 'Here is a wire from the police Thana of Manabad,' he said, 'ordering us to arrest one Lal Singh who is charged with theft and with obstructing a police sepoy in the discharge of his duty in the village of Nandpur.'

'Are you a thief, ohe?' said the recruiting Havildar, turning round on Lal Singh. 'Is that why you were so eager to join up? I thought there was something black in the pulses. I should never have enlisted you.'

Lal Singh lifted his face to contemplate the sudden change that had come over Lehna Singh. The callous, heartless swine, who uttered a hundred falsehoods to the minute and deceived the stupid rustics!

'This illegally begotton is charged with theft of property belonging to no less a person than Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh, Rais-i-azam and landlord of the village of Nandpur,' said Farid Khan, grinding his words deliberately.

'The third time in a month this thing has happened,' rebuked Babu Khushi Ram, turning to Lehna Singh. 'You will land yourself in jail one of these days, Havildara, if you are not careful.'

'How should I have known, Babu Khushi Ram?' said Lehna Singh, lifting his hands askance.

'Acha, handcuff your man and take him,' said Captain

Puri, in the Punjabized Hindustani in which he was used to ordering servants about.

'Handcuff him,' the police sergeant ordered the constables, and they advanced towards Lal Singh. The boy, pale and shamefaced and angry at his fate, stood passive and silent, offering his hands to them.

At that instant, however, Captain Robert Owen, the adjutant of the regiment, emerged from Babu Khushi Ram's office with a file in his hand. Seeing the constables handcuffing the recruit, he came up to them. He was a quiet, tall man with a head of curly dark hair. His small blue eyes shone with a poet's sensitiveness and there was a transparent ripple of kindliness on his arched lips belied by the general hardness of his face.

Everyone of the men present came to attention and saluted the Sahib, including Captain Puri. There was a sudden lull during which the hard wills of the agents of the law stiffened and the heart behind Lal Singh's chest throbbed tempestuously. For a moment he sought to control the shaking dullness in his legs and thighs and half lifted his eyes to look around him. Then he stood motionless.

'Good morning, Captain Puri,' the adjutant greeted, taking out a silver cigarette-case from his pocket and offering it to the doctor. Then, turning to the recruiting Havildar, he said, in broken Hindustani, 'Hallo, Havildar Lehna Singh, are you still a pukka Sikh and refuse to smoke although you tell lies?

'. . . . What is the matter?'

'Toba Huzoor,' the Havildar said conventionally, taking his hands to his ears as if in penance for a sin.

'He has brought a thief with him, sir,' Khushi Ram said in English, volunteering the information in order to be on the safe side lest any complications arose.

'And what have you stolen, khalsaji?' Owen asked casually, turning to the boy and addressing him in Punjabi.

Lal Singh was thrilled by his nearness to a white man, to smell the delicate perfume of tobacco mixed with the scent of well-laundered linen that came from him, and to contemplate the superior gaiety that seemed to spring from

his light-blue eyes and his smile

'I didn't steal anything, sir,' he replied in English. 'The landlord of my village has a grudge against my family and he had a warrant issued for my arrest just because I was seen talking to his daughter.'

Saying this, Lalu stopped suddenly as if his tongue had been smothered by the fire of all the emotions that had welled up in him.

'Oh, a love affair,' said Owen, suppressing his astonishment at the idea of an ordinary recruit speaking English, while the others dilated their eyes and turned their ears to hear, excited at the emergence among them of a rustic who could twist his tongue to pronounce the angrezi speech.

'It was a frame-up, sir,' continued Lal Singh. 'I was a boy scout, and Mr. Long, the Deputy Commissioner of Manabad, can bear witness to my good conduct.'

'Oh, Mr. Long,' said Owen. 'you know Mr. Long, do you?' And he smiled, for he himself knew about Long, having often read the Deputy Commissioner's articles on Social Reconstruction in the *Civil and Military Gazette*.

'Acha,' he said, turning to the police sergeant, 'leave the warrant for Lal Singh's arrest in the office and we will make inquiries. Meanwhile, Doctor Sahib will carry on the medical examination . . . .'

Lal Singh stood bewildered and exhausted, hugging the ray of hope that seemed to emerge on the horizon. He would be enlisted. He was spared. One day he might prosper and become an officer now that he was free.

'Thank you, sir,' he stammered excitedly.

The Sahib nodded, snapped his finger at his spaniel who had run up to him, smiled evasively and walked away towards his office.

'Go, my friend,' said the recruiting Havildar to Farid Khan with a laugh, his equanimity completely restored. 'Don't come distrubing my work every day.'

'The orders of the Sarkar!' said Farid Khan and beckoned Dhan Gopal and Dost Muhammad to follow him back to the waiting tonga.

XXIV

LAL SINGH was gazetted as Recruit No. 12444 to 2 Platoon, B Company in the 68th Rifles. For the warrant for his arrest was withdrawn by Sardar Bahadur Harbans Singh as soon as he heard that the boy had joined the army. The landlord was afraid of the Privileges that a soldier enjoyed before civil courts.

The B Company occupied the second of the twelve barracks which lay beyond the stretch of the maidan. And here, along with the other recruits, the boy was given a loose hemp-strung charpai and a kit-bag full of regulation clothing, the cost of which, contrary to what the recruiting sergeant had said, was marked down by a lean, mean quarter-master Havildar.

In spite of the gratitude he felt to fate in the incarnation of the Ajitan Sahib for rescuing him from the clutches of the law and for slurring over the fact that he, a Sikh by birth, had, on account of his short hair, to be enlisted as a Hindu Dogra, he was not as excited as the other recruits about this new life.

Still, he had a bitter taste in his mouth on discovering the lie of Lehna Singh's promise of a monthly pay of eleven rupees clear—with clothes, goods and other needs as free gifts. The lentils provided in the kitchen were full of stones. The bread was without much butter. And there was a complete lack of privacy. Moreover, the sepoys resented the coming of the recruits among them, for not only was the line already overcrowded, but the old-timers felt a certain superiority over the new-comers.

Lalu would sit at odd moments, embarrassed by the strangeness of the new surroundings. He would look surreptitiously across the hard, bare, long, empty hall of the barracks, punctuated along both walls at every two yards with beds cleanly covered with white sheets and flat pillows, on which the sepoys sat about, detached from each other, polishing their buttons, their shoes and leather belts which they neatly arranged afterwards on the space apportioned to them on the wooden racks fixed to the wall. And he

would wonder what life had in store for him.

But it was not long before he knew what life would mean for him here. He sat on his bed one morning after he had been on fatigue duty, listening to the tik-tik of a lizard which crawled on the wall. There was a noise of heavy footsteps in the verandah, a sudden shaking of the earth with the inrush of an avalanche of sepoys through the doors, sweating from head to foot as they ran back from parade, gasping for breath. He tried to shrink into himself, but he could not withdraw his attention from the men.

One of them, a short stocky man, Lance-Corporal Lok Nath, with a surly smile on his curled lips, dragged in a naked flatnosed boy. 'Look, look, ohe, look,' he shouted, 'this little bastard will show you the parade which his father the bania performs with his mother in bed at night.'

'Oh, let me go, let me go,' the child protested, struggling to get out of Lok Nath's grasp. 'I am going to the halwai's shop to drink my afternoon milk.'

'No, no, you come with me. I can give you something better than milk,' said Lok Nath, dragging the boy along.

Lal Singh sat dumb in the effort to control the quivering dimness in his eyes while the soldiers laughed.

'Come here, come, come to me,' said another sepoy, pointing suggestively.

'Ohe, let me go, let me go, you are hurting my hand. Hai. Oh my mother,' the child prayed and shrieked.

'Come, bastard, come, don't kick up such a row, come, no one will eat you,' said another voice farther down.

But the child was stubborn as he dragged his feet on the ground and sobbed.

Lal Singh hung his head down and explored the long grey shadow of fury that was breaking over his head and eyes.

'Come, come, seducer of your daughter,' called Lok Nath as he dragged the bania's son. 'Come, I shan't eat you.'

The child relaxed his stubborn resistance and advanced a step or two, half-afraid and unwilling.

'Give him to me here,' said a sepoy, rushing up to the boy and catching hold of him.

'No, no,' the child cried and bawled.

'Don't shout, lover of your mother,' said Lok Nath, lifting him up in his hands.

But the boy was kicking his legs in the air furiously and wriggling his round, chubby body till he almost slipped from Lok Nath's hand. The Lance Naik caught him, however, and then, rolling him upside down, he spat on his buttocks, struck him a resounding smack with the palm of his hand, and put him down in the middle of the hall.

There were wild shouts of merriment at this and peals of laughter, while the boy, indignant with shame, swerved round and chased Lok Nath, to strike him.

The Lance Naik who had been running away stopped suddenly as he felt the boy at his shins. Then he lifted him up again, and laughing a nervous hysterical laugh, repeated his performance. The boy scrambled up and scratched and tore with his little hands. But the Lance-Corporal pushed him aside like a dog. For a moment he stood harassed and helpless, seeking a way of escape. But overcome by the jeering, the rude noises and the laughter of the sepoys, he fell where he stood and began to roll on the ground, weeping, wailing and moaning.

'Get up, get up and run away, sulky, little devil,' one of the men shouted.

The boy got up with his hands on his weeping eyes as if he would never face anyone, and scurried round to go and strike anyone who came within the orbit of his reach. But he stumbled across a bedstead that lay in the way of his blind rush. He gave a long shriek, then rallied and, howling like a tiger in a cage, ran first one way then another, and then, with a cry of unutterable weariness, he fell on the ground to hide the shame of his nudity.

'Get up, silly bastard,' another sepoy shouted. 'We are only joking. Can't you take a joke?'

But the terror of his own shrieks had stirred the child's body to a high-pitched hysteria and he lay crying and wailing, his face twisted and contorted into an ugly grimace.

'Chuck him out, throw him out, the swine, for God's sake,' Lok Nath ordered.

'Why did you tease him?' Kirpu, an old, kindly sepoy, orderly to the Subedar Major, of the regiment ventured as he came in.

This seemed to infuriate the Lance-Corporal and he yelled his order again at the top of his voice and rushed towards the boy with upraised hands.

'Throw him out! Take him out of, here, swine, or I will kill him and kill you all!'

'Come, come, man,' Kirpu said, stopping him from going any farther.

At this mild reproach Lok Nath burst into fury and stamping upon the floor shouted : 'Shun! Who are you, bastard, to prevent me from doing what I want?'

But while this was going on Lalu arose from where he had sat. And, with a half-suppressed smacking of his pouting lips he picked up the child, who struggled frantically, kicking his legs and scratching hard, and bore him out of the barracks followed by loud cries and laughter.

'Ohe, why did you do that?' Lok Nath barked when Lalu came back. 'What is your name? Why didn't you let that bastard alone?'

Lalu had hardly opened his mouth to reply when Lok Nath shouted : 'You are a recruit and you must learn to obey orders, illegally begotten, or I will report you to the company commander.'

Lalu looked at the corporal's face, dumb and terror-stricken, and dared not answer back lest it should land him into more trouble immediately after his escape from the clutches of the law.

'Who will put you out if you stay in your place?' said Dhanoo, a wizened old sepoy who sat on his charpai, smoking a coconut hubble-bubble.

XXV

THE sun was shining with relentless burning hatred in its

eyes and the whole world was enveloped with the cruel heat of layer upon layer of shimmering white stillness, broken only by the fluttering of an occasional sparrow.

Lok Nath, who cared little for the sun or the stillness, yelled at the recruits who crawled up to the parade ground.

'It is the time of eight o'clock and you are walking up slackly! Fallin!' he shouted in the broken anglicized Hindustani of orders, 'Fallin!'

'Fallin,' he reiterated, as the recruits were assembling on the parade ground, and he thrust the malignant moroseness of his chin outwards to set it in the proper mould of authority.

The boys hurried thum, thum, thum on the heavy military boots which fitted rather loosely on their civilian feet. They were stale and tired in the queer, airless, enervating heat of the morning.

'Hurry up, sons of donkeys,' Lok Nath shouted, advancing a step towards them with a prodigious flourish of his right fist.

The recruits ran, shaking with fear, and fell into a ragged formation.

Lok Nath advanced grimly and slapped Lalu, who had taken his stand towards the end of the line though he was the second recruit in the descending series according to his height. With a glint of fire in his heavy-browed eyes he raved at him, 'Rape sister! Son of an owl! When will you learn the elements of parade?'

Lalu's face burnt with the glow of a cinder. He knew why the Lance Naik had singled him out for rebuke and his heart smouldered with indignation, but fear held him in an icy grip. He went hastily to his place. After a quick shuffling, the recruits reformed.

'Squad, Shun! Phoram phor! Lok Nath ordered.

Some of the recruits seemed too overcome to move, while others stayed where they were on seeing a few stand still.

'Haven't you remembered or what?' Lok Nath ground the words between his teeth. 'On the command of phoram

phor, odd numbers stand fast, even numbers take a sharp pace to the rear and then to the right. Has it not sunk into your heads! Now, phoram phor!'

The whole squad took a sharp pace to the rear and then to the right and in doing so collided.

'Sons of bitches! Elephants! Camels! Asses!' Raved Lok Nath. And advancing to Lalu said : 'What is your number?'

'We didn't call out the numbers,' said the boy.

Lok Nath raised his clenched fist to strike. But he knew that he should have asked them to call out their numbers.

'Call your numbers!' he bawled.

'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. . . .' The recruits uttered the sounds as they looked straight before them.

'Now, phoram phor!' snapped Lok Nath.

Slowly the fours were formed, not without number eight muddling, things up by stopping too long with the odd numbers.'

'You there, you son of a gun, what is your number?'

'Twelve thousand four hundred and forty-eight,' answered the recruit.

'Ohe, born of incest, shameless, forgetful cur! I am not asking your regimental number. I want your squad number,' explained Lok Nath.

After considerable hesitation, during which the corporal prepared himself to pounce on the fellow the recruit whispered :

'Eight!'

'Speak up! Bastard! Has your mother died that you are mincing your words!' And he began his timeworn lecture.

'Now, how many a time shall I tell you that you have to keep the izzat of the paltan to which you have been recruited? You have to prove worthy of the Sarkar whose salt you have been eating for two months. And although you have done this parade and even practised with wooden rifles, you duffers are still too hopelessly slack. I am afraid

that the Karnel Sahib may suddenly come one day and catch you at your antics and complain against me. I don't want to lose my stripes, and so, sons of bitches, you look out or I will flay you alive. Now, left turn!'

He barely paused to give the recruits time to breathe and get ready for the new movement. And to add to their difficulties, a recruit mumbled, 'Ohe, look, the sky is darkening!'

Caught unawares by the order, and eager to catch the tail end of the rumours in the ranks, some of the recruits turned right, some left. Lok Nath advanced up to the line in high rage, levelling blows indiscriminately at the boys, and shouting the while 'Sons of swine! Sons of dogs! Sons of donkeys! You haven't even learnt this!'

'But, Havildarji,' a recruit near Lal Singh protested.

Lok Nath, who was blind with anger, went up and gave three clear, sharp blows on Lal Singh's face, imagining him to have protested.

'What have I done that you are beating me again?' Lal Singh said, taking his hand to caress his face as his eyes swarm over the brown, dusty, sun-soaked parade ground and were blinded by a fainting weakness.

'Keep quiet!' Lok Nath shouted and stepped back in readiness to order again.

Lal Singh suddenly noticed a smear of blood on his hand and murmured to himself, 'Oh nuisance, my nose must be bleeding!'

'You dare to abuse me,' Lok Nath shouted, rushing up to Lal Singh and dealing him another and yet another slap.

'His nose is bleeding!' a recruit next to Lal Singh ventured.

'Go to the barracks,' ordered Lok Nath, looking round to see if any officers were coming. 'You are exempted from parade for the morning, Go swine! Get out of my sight!'

As Lalu was walking away, not daring to lift his tear-filled eyes to the squads of sepoys engaged in drill on the maidan, he heard one of the recruits shout out :

'Everyone will get out of your sight now, Havildara, because a dust storm is coming!'

And there were scattering footsteps.

'Stand there, swine! Keep standing! Lok Nath raved. 'Stand there you too, Lal Singh!'

The recruits stood where they were till a great dust cloud, black as the night, blotted out the sun and came plunging the maidan in utter gloom, and filled the land deep with dust and sand. The men flew helter-skelter, shouting. The storm is coming, the storm is coming!' even as the birds shot with all the strength of their pinions into different directions for shelter. But in a moment the sudden squall which had arisen from the open country engulfed them. The wind swirled in a mad rush. Leaves of trees, thorny bushes, whole plants, waste paper were flying from end to end like meteors, and sand and dust was blowing with a force and velocity that scalded the flesh. The earth had waited in vain for months for the rain to lift the singeing, roaring heat of the sun, but now it seemed to burst open and rush howling, screaming across the sky, in a violent, destructive rage, uprooting everything. Torn from his feet and pushed forward with hundreds of scurrying feet to the shelter of the barracks, Lalu tried to see in the storm a visitation of his own wrath, conveniently become the wrath of heaven, on Lok Nath.

XXVI

THE intensive parades pressed the life out of the new recruits.

Awakened from the sound sleep of the cool dawn, by the sounding of the Reveille, when the fatigue of the previous day's work had hardly been quenched through restless tossings on the bed in breathless, hot nights, Lalu had hardly walked back from the iron latrines about a quarter of a mile away, via the crowded well where a hundred sepoys pushed and shoved and scrambled to perform their long ablutions, when the bugle sounded, calling them to the

maidan.

It took days weeks and months of squad drill to knock them into shape. For most of the drill instructors, like Lok Nath, had a way of clouding the intellect of the best of men with his loud, vociferous shouts and filthy abuse and his hard, high-handed manner. So cowed down were the boys and even the mature sepoys that even after the most vigorous training they were likely, as soon as they heard a roared order which they had not quite expected, to disintegrate into an irregular echelon of individuals. They marched through other parading, platoons, lost parts, or adopted formations which brought them face to face with a blank wall. And when it came to learning the science of musketry, they grazed their bare knees and hands and faces, and lost what wits they ever possessed.

For to hold a rifle correctly and in the style of the instructor is perhaps not difficult. But to sit, kneel, stand and lie down and to bring your back-sight and foresight into an undeviating straight line with the base of a bull's eye, to press the trigger in the manner laid down by the Musketry regulations, imposed by a capricious, blood-thirsty instructor, to adjust your sights, to perform the loading motions rapidly and correctly, to fire five rounds when it was all make-believe, as they were dummy cartridges and fictitious ranges and snapping triaggers—all this involved mistakes.

And every mistake involved not one slap on the face, nor one dig in the stomach, nor one kick on the drying flesh of a badly hurt knee, but a wanton brutality which was certainly without parallel in Lalu's experience.

But the make-believe of musketry was nothing to the blood-thirstiness of the technique of bayonet fighting practised on sack dummies.

'All brave men like hand-to-hand fighting,' thundered the voice of the instructor. 'Therefore all you brave sepoys must learn to kill the enemy by hitting him in a vital spot. The heart, the belly, the testicles must be aimed at. But if the enemy has the advantage in attack, swiftly fell him with a blow from the butt of the rifle and trample upon him and

drive the bayonet deep. Always drive the bayonet deep into the body, and draw it out so that he bleeds inside and is finished for ever. Ready. . . . one, two, three.'

And the sepoys heaved with deep indrawn breaths and charged with all the force, all the might of their bodies, for the penalty of weakness in this matter was to have the butt-end of a rifle dug into one's own belly.

After the morning parade under a sun which was growing even more cruel, they came sweating back to the barracks and scrambled for the midday meal of the eternal stone-filled lentils, and the badly baked chapatis and lumpy rice which the company cooks had been busy preparing. And then they set to polishing belts and buttons and boots. Especially boots. For these were coarse, heavy things made of cow-hide which remain hard unless they are treated with mustard oil, a process which made it difficult to polish them into a shiny patent-leather black such as the N.C.O.'s insisted upon. And those who were illiterate went to learn the Hindi alphabet in the regimental school and had the ruler if they yawned during the sweltering afternoons occasionally relieved by a hot desert wind which scalded the skin. Or they had lectures in saluting and then got ready for more parade in the afternoon, the ordeal fraught with all the dangers of the morning parade as well as others which fatigue or sloth or any other 'crime' might bring.

For 'crime' in the army, Lalu found, was nothing so vulgar as the stealing of a little fodder, but a designation capable of infinite shades of subtlety. Crime meant anything from blinking on parade to having a queer look from over-sleeping or to not having one's hair dressed to the austere pattern dictated to sepoys of all religions except the Sikhs.

The interpretation of crime was left to the N.C.O.'s who it must be said, revealed the subtlest minds.

Lalu, of course, got into trouble on account of his hair.

The rumour had gone round when someone in the Sikh Company of the 68th found out that Lalu was originally a Sikh who had had his long hair cut, that he had made a false declaration about being a Hindu Dogra when he was

enlisted.

Lance Naik Lok Nath heard this rumour one day and reported him to Havildar Lachman Singh, who asked him to get ready for presentation to the company commander, Lieut. Audley, in the afternoon.

Lok Nath marched Lalu up to the office and kept guard over him as if the boy were a prisoner. The fear of possible complications which might follow upon this trial was enough to drive Lalu desperate, but on top of that hung the menace of Lok Nath's presence. He trembled and shook with fear and felt as if he would collapse when he was presented to the Sahib.

'Bring in Sepoy Lal Singh, Havildar Sahib' came the company commander's voice after the accused had crouched in the sun-soaked verandah watching the rustle and bustle of babus and orderlies.

'Sepoy Lal Singh and the witnesses,' Havildar Lachman Singh called out.

Lalu got up and brushing himself into shape marched into the office followed by Lok Nath and the Sikh informer.

'Halt! Right turn!' Havildar Lachman Singh ordered.

These movements brought the accused face to face with Audley Sahib.

'What is this sepoy's crime?' asked Lieut. Audley, a tall, lanky, easy-going, humorous, sallow-coloured specimen, whose most conspicuous feature was a large protruding lower jaw.

'On his conduct sheet, Huzoor,' said Lachman Singh.

While the Sahib was looking at the conduct sheet, Lance-Corporal Lok Nath stood at attention, tightened his form and, fixing his eyes with great determination on the table, said tonelessly, 'Huzoor, Sepoy Sucha Singh here comes from the village of Verka, near Nandpur, and reports that Sepoy Lal Singh is a Sikh who had his hair cut and has enlisted as a Dogra by making a false declaration that he is a Hindu Jat when really he is a Sikh Jat.'

'Sepoy Soocha Singh, what do you know of this?' asked Lieut. Audley.

'Huzoor, I have heard a rumour....'

'Oh, rumour,' said Lieut. Audley. 'This country is full of rumours.'

At this Havildar Lachman Singh came to attention and said, 'Huzoor, Sepoy Lal Singh's file is on the table. It is true that he was originally a Sikh, but the Ajitan Sahib knew of this and enlisted the boy as a Hindu Jat because Lal Singh had had his hair cut long before he joined up, and because he is a Rajput and comes from a village very near the hills. Also there is a letter from the Deputy Commissioner Sahib Bahadur of Manabad which explains the sepoy's whole record.'

'If the Ajitan Sahib knows this, why has the sepoy been brought up here?'

'Lance Naik Lok Nath's report, Huzoor,' replied Lachman Singh.

'Look here, Lance Naik Lok Nath, I congratulate you on the vigilance with which you carry out your duties, but don't present sepoy after sepoy here and waste my office time. You, sepoy Lal Singh, would have committed the most serious crime a soldier can commit if you had not told Ajitan Sahib your real religion and caste. In future you must try to be very cautious and give no cause to your N.C.O.'s to report you here. You must obey all orders, and must become a proud soldier. There is no disgrace in that. Do you see!'

'Yes, Huzoor,' said Lal Singh, and was going to continue but restrained himself.

'Your conduct-sheet remains clean,' said Lieut. Audley, 'I won't record anything but "admonished".'

'Right turn! Quick march!' ordered Havildar Lachman Singh.

The procession thump-thumped out of the office.

'You wait till I catch you out, my son,' said Lance Naik Lok Nath on the way back. 'You will soon find out my mettle. Don't preen yourself and think you've won.'

XXVII

THE mute and patient peasant in Lal Singh, the primitive natural son of the soil, who was descended from the dim nation of stalwart men hardened by long duress, who had furrowed the slumbrous earth and felt a sense of power in the sweating sinews of his flesh, the elemental creature who had heard tales of long strifes and battles which his ancestors had fought to win their land, found kinship with the sepoys after all, with at least some of them.

The boy liked Havildar Lachman Singh, who was the chief N.C.O. in charge of the company. Lachman's handsome open face, with its fine aquiline nose which breathed like that of a horse, and its clear, sharp, hawk's eyes, reflected a kindliness and generosity which had impressed Lalu from the very start. Besides, Lachman was an accomplished gymnast, whose skill at the parallel bars and the horizontal bar, at fencing and hockey, evoked respect from everyone in the regiment.

And Lalu had been lucky enough to attract Lachman's notice while he was practising at hockey with the recruits soon after his arrival dribbling the ball as he had learnt to do when he played for his school at Sherkot. Lachman had asked him to report the next Sunday morning to get his colours and be ready to play in the match that afternoon against Connaught Rangers.

And on that Sunday afternoon, he had come into his own. For once, through the kindness of Lachman Singh, he had felt himself emerging from the slough of despond into an exhilarating world of exciting happenings.

He had played on the right wing and to his great happiness and surprise, Captain Owen, the Adjutant who was responsible for his liberty, was playing inside right. They had combined so well that the Sahib had patted him on the back during half-time, which was an extraordinary favour in the eyes of all the sepoys who were watching. Encouraged by Owen Sahib's kindness, he had suddenly determined to outdo himself and instead of pasing the pill on, he had,

on, finding himself near the D of the Rangers, taken the chance to shoot directly from an angle of forty-five and had scored a marvellous goal. He had heard Major Peacock, who was playing centre-forward, shout angrily as he had hit the ball, and for the barest moment his eyes had darkened with fear and nervousness. But the ball had gone past the goalkeeper and the Ajitan Sahib had called out 'Shabash'.

After the match, Havildar Lachman Singh had treated him to soda-water and told him that he would be taken into the regimental team. And from the fact that the Ajitan Sahib had pointed at him while the Sahib stood with the other white officers and their wives, and the Tommies, drinking from the bottles that stood arrayed on long tables, he knew that he had become a distinguished sepoy.

The prominence which Lalu had achieved led to a tension between Lachman Singh and Lok Nath, which came to a head when the Lance Naik forced the Havildar to report Lalu for having made a false declaration. But Lachman Singh had negotiated that affair quietly and tactfully. And Lalu felt that he had at least one friend in the regiment.

Kirpu, the orderly of the Subedar Major, who was nicknamed 'Uncle' for his age and eccentricity, had, during the few visits he paid to the barracks, always shown a solicitude for Lalu's welfare, which was none the less sincere for being tinged with a good humoured cynicism that came from his long experience of the army.

'Whosoever has the staff, has the buffalo,' Kirpu would say with his half-open phlegmatic eyes, and with a weary smile on the corners of his lips. 'No one else has any rights, I tell you, son, who hasn't got a staff in this world. And mark you, I know the world a bit. I have been to Chin with this regiment, and I have been to the frontiers. Everywhere, "Whosoever has the staff has the buffalo". In the cantonment of Hongkong, there is Angrezi Raj and the Sahib logs have bungalows with big guns ranged outside them And in the bazaars, where there are angrezi offices and shops

of books and sweets and cloth, with small copper plates showing their names, and not big boards as we have outside the shops in our cities, there are Sikhs wearing the uniforms given them by the Angrezi Sarkar, and the Chini folk are like slaves.

'And in the frontier also, the red-faced, healthy Pathans are beginning to bow to the Sahibs though they sill kidnap a Mem or a rich official. I tell you, and I know this, son, from my own experience, there is only one thing a man can do nowadays, and that is obey.

'At one time,' he continued, 'I and my brothers had forty acres of land, which was given to my father by Raja Sansar Chand. But before I joined this paltan twenty years ago, it was all lost because there was always drought in the hills of Kangra and the revenue couldn't be paid, and it was attached by the Bania moneylender.

'In the time of Raja Sansar Chand, the Good, the taxes were remitted if the harvests were bad and it was like Ram Raj. But now the only thing a man can do is to obey, my son, just to obey. I am a soldier and I must obey orders. You are a soldiers and you must obey orders. Obey the order of the Sarkar and of God who made us servants of the Sarkar for our karma. The soldier has to go to Chin or to the frontier, to Burma or to Secunderabad. He must obey. Obedience is the first duty and the last of the soldier.'

He would pause and coming close to Lalu, whisper in his ears, thump him on the back and run away. 'If you can catch hold of that swine Lok Nath in the wilds some day, give him one and don't care for the limp lord.'

Another time he would come in and if Lalu were alone, he would be a little more confidential and say : 'Son, believe it or not, "God's work is well done, man's badly". But I am sure there is God in man, that it is man's destiny to strive towards God, and that the most perfect men, the saints, are always giving good counsel to the stupid and the ignorant and leading them to a higher goal. I am in love with the saints, though, mark you, I have met more charlatans than saints.'

'You must meet my brother,' Lalu would say. 'Dayal

Singh is something by way of being a saint.'

'Har son, you must take me during my next furlough, because I am in love with the saints. I will obey their orders and press their feet sooner than attend to the orders of this bitch of a Sarkar and her puppies like Lok Nath. You are a very well-read person, almost a Babu, and you will think I am mad, but I tell you I have come to believe this after long deliberation that good men have always struggled to cure the defects of the ignorant, to lift the scales from their eyes and even suffer martyrdom for speaking the truth. Son we must peel the onion every day to find ourselves. Not sit like today's yogis with locks to their kness, who beg, but sages who fed the poor and advised them in their worldly affairs, and arranged their lives. I am in love with the saints, whatever you say. For here, "The edge cuts and the soldier fights and the credit goes to the Subedar Major Sahib and the Karnel". It is all a snare, son, it is all a snare. Listen to Uncle Kirpu and don't forget his advice.'

'You are a wonder owl, Uncle Kirpu,' Lalu would say. And Kirpu evasively replied, 'Uncle does not make any trouble, son, uncle is in love with the saints.'

Another friend Lalu made was Daddy Dhanoo, an old bird, older and even more fatalistic than Uncle Kirpu, with large eyes protuding from his sombre, dark, shapeless face weighted by a wrinkled brow.

One day, when Dhanoo came back from ten days' leave, most of which he had spent journeying to and back from his remote village in the Hoshiarpur hills, Lalu asked him jocularly, 'How was your family and what have you brought me, Daddy Dhanoo?' Dhanoo kept very still and Lalu felt that he had offended the old man by his impudence, because like all peasants Dhanoo was extremely reticent about his family affairs.

But then he suddenly heard Dhanoo clearing his throat and saying, 'Sharpers in the towns pretend to be poverty-stricken, son, but animals by the hundreds and men by the thousands suffer a pain beyond endurance in out-of-the-way villages like mine, so that the cities may wear silks and eat

fried bread. There has been no rainfall in our parts for three successive years and my people being landless labourers, we can't get jobs with anyone. And if it weren't for the Sarkar I should die of starvation.'

'Have they no money?' Lalu had asked stupidly. And Daddy Dhanoo seemed to sink into a pit of despair and said, 'Money, money, we don't know the sight of it in those parts. That's why we come and join the paltans. If it were not for the Sarkar we should die of starvation, son, we would die...'

After this he took his hand to his bag and dragged out a roll of dried mango-juice and gave it to Lalu, saying, 'Here son, I brought a little gift for you from the hills, but don't eat too much of it or you will get dysentery.'

'Let me pay for it,' Lalu offered, thinking Dhanoo must have spent money on his poor relatives and would go without since he had strained his purse to by him a gift.

'I want no gold, no silver,' the old man said, rather irritated. 'All that I possess is God's blessings and I don't even want to have more of these. I have no wish to prosper now, at the end of my life. I had a wife . . . .'

But he was overpowered by a grief which showed that his wife had died and that he was bereft of his only solace. And Lalu withdrew tactfully, so that the old man shouldn't break down.

'What is my destiny in this place?' he asked himself often, as he lay during the sweltering hot days and nights of the summer, or when he passed by some village during a route march, burnt by the elements, bruised and battered by the instructors. 'What will happen to me? Shall I always be in the army and never go back home? Why was I born? To suffer pain? Why did not the ache in the heart stop?'

But though the questions stood like hostile forces before his eyes, day after day and night after night, he didn't really want an answer. He had vague ideas of trying to win gradual promotion to the rank of Indian officer, or applying for transfer to the staff of the office if there was a vacancy for a clerk in the regiment, though the

contempt in which the babus were held among the men lent weight to his earlier resolution. But the examinations were held in the autumn, and it was difficult to work in the summer of this desert cantonment of Ferozepur.

During the cooler hours when the clash of azure and scarlet had lapsed into a sunset of burning gold, he would rise from the silent despair of prolonged meditations and stroll down into the spaces between the barracks and look inanely around. A few men, bare except for khaki shorts of strips of cloth, would be chopping huge knots of wood-fuel outside the mudplastered kitchen, their bodies soaking with perspiration. Others were eternally walking away towards the latrines, jugs in hand and whispering sacred verses. Others still were donning their uniforms or cleaning their rifles before going on duty at the 'quarter guard'.

But after drinking half a seer of milk with hot jalebis soaked in it at the regimental bazaar, he returned, for he had devoured these sights till his sences had staled with the monotony of the routine and the dullness of the heat which blasted everything—stifling even the sparrows which ordinarily twittered about from verandah to verandah but now sat in hiding or lay dead in the lines, purple and pink where their flesh had been torn by swarms of black ants. And he was too tired in the fast-falling darkness to read or write or do anything. There were hardly any lamps in the barracks, and the Last Post scunded soon after a meal came one's way in the dingy, dark, smoky kitchen, where a single cook worked day and night, cursing the wooden fuel which burnt so slowly as he baked the chapatis on the griddle, and begged, prayed, implored the sepoys not to scrounge.

Once a month he walked down to town in the uniform of the regiments—a khaki turban, a khaki shirt, shorts and neat cowhide shoes of native design. And he enjoyed the prestige which attached to the army in the eyes of the city folk. But the enjoyment of this privilege involved the sacrifice of all except business contacts with the townsfolk, because the sepoy's prestige was built up on the fear of the townies. For the soldiers might beat up anyone they didn't

like, or report an innocent person to the authorities for a misdemeanour, loot a stall if they chose to, and still get away with impunity.

Also Lalu had no money to spend, as he had dutifully sent home most of the pay he received. So he could neither buy nor willingly indulge in the only pleasures that could be had in the desert of Ferozepur cantonment—synthetic sherbet and the flesh of diseased, old, four-anna whores, who sat hawking themselves as they chewed betel-leaf in the prostitutes' bazaar.

He felt lonely and homesick. For if the helter-skelter world of dirty village lanes, sprinkled all over with the droppings of hens, cow-dung and the excreta of children, was sordid, there was no joy in this sharp, clear, hard prison from which there seemed to be no escape. And he found his mind going back in the midst of his daily duties to Nandpur. Lying down on his belly on a rough black blanket, his musket adjusted to his shoulder, firing empty rounds at the black dummies painted on the white screens two hundred yards away, he would be suddenly distracted by a glimpse of his mother bending over the fireplace in the kitchen of the courtyard, or see in a flash the blurred vision of the tailors, busy sewing gold thread on the silken head aprons for Dayal Singh's wife. And the shot went wide of the range.

But even though the danger of a kick from the instructor hovered over the back of his head, he wondered whether the marriage had been celebrated successfully and whether everything was all right at home, and they were not angry with him.

For he had had no letter from home during the four, almost five months he had been in the army, not even an acknowledgment of the money he sent them.

'Why had they not written?' he wondered. Had they decided they were well rid of him?

'Mother must have wept when she came back home and found that I had gone,' he said to console himself. And he wanted to desert from the regiment and go back, if only to see what was happening. But the fate of the other

deserters who had been caught, brought back, tried and kept on bread and water in the quarter guard discourged him.

One day, however, as he was coming back from the morning parade, thinking how at that very hour his mother used to take bread and whey up to the well, he was confronted by an orderly from the ocffie.

'Your name, Lal Singh, B Company?' the man said.

'Yes, Khan Sahib,' Lal Singh replied, respectfully elevating the sepoy to the dignity of a lord.

'Your father is seriously ill in your village,' said the man casually. 'Get ready to go on leave. The Ajitan Sahib had received a wire. Report at the office and get your railway pass from the Babu of your company. Captan Sahib's orders.'

Lal Sing's face turned eagerly towards the office, though he stood riveted to his feet and didn't move. The suddenness of the news had emptied his mind.

'When did the wire come?' he asked the orderly, to relieve his embarrassment.

'How should I know?' answered the sepoy. 'I am not your father's servant.' And he looked at Lalu contemptuously. He felt resentfut an having to go delivering a message to an inferior.

At the impact of the orderly's words, Lalu began to feel sad. The picture of his father's eagle-eyed face defined itself behind his eyes. He tried to realize it, to see it, but he couldn't. And he stood in a blank, marvelling at the rapidity with which a little distance, a change of air and water, had made him completely callous. He tried to will the love of the old man into himself.

'Acha, Khan Sahib,' he said, putting his hand to his head in a lame salute. 'I will come with you and get the pass.' And he procceeded to walk behind the orderly.

The sun was shining in a vast refulgence over the red brick barracks and over the yellow, well-dusted compounds which lay by the quarters of the Indian officers. The teel of the tiresomely eternal, inexhaustible fire burnt into the boy's soul with the same intensity with which it had burnt

into him when he had trudged behind his bullocks. A stray crow was cawing with a cracked voice. He felt a quickening panic possess him and a strange urge to scream, to utter a groan, to wail.

But the elements mocked at his passion. He contracted his fists tightened his face, bit his lips, hung his head down and walked slowly along.

XXVIII

AFTER a quick journey by rail from Ferozepur to Manabad and then a jolting crawl by the branch line to Nandpur, Lalu reached the village, feeling as if time had faded into space, so sudden was the alternation of people and things.

As he trod through the thundery stillness of the twilight by the walls of the caravanserai which exuded an almost tanglible heat, he saw Jhandu, the yekka driver, smoking his hubble-bubble on a charpai in the yard near the horses. which munched at their straw even as they kicked at the swarms of flies that hummed over their bodies.

'Come, son, have you just come? said Jhandu, leaving his hookah.

'Han, Uncle, thank God I am here. The journey in this hot weather is so wearisome, it has burnt my head.'

'You should have let me know,' said Jhandu gravely. 'I would have brought the yekka to the station.' And he got up and began to walk with Lalu.

The boy was surprised at the respect Jhandu was showing him. But Jhandu had liked him before he left the village and was perhaps impressed by his clean mufti. As they walked along Jhandu hung his head down, however, and did not say anything and Lalu began to wonder. A couple of hens crossed their path cluck-clucking and making a wild furore as if they were being chased by a cat. Jhandu took no notice and still walked with bent head.

'How is everything in the village?' Lalu asked, unable to restrain himself from knowing the worst.

'Something terrible has happend, son,' Jhandu said with

a sigh as he put his arm round Lalu. 'After you went away, the marriage of Dayal Singh didn't take place as the girl's parents were got at by mischief-mongers. But there is no talk of that. Only Sharm Singh took it to heart and was very angry with Harbans Singh and Hardit Singh for making your family ashamed before the world. And he brooded over it. He would have forgotten it, however, expect that one day, they say, he caught Hardit and the Mahant Nandgir red-handed with Kesari, having a drinking festival on the banks of the river in the forest. And he was so incensed that he ran to the nearest well, got a chopper and murdered Hardit as the landlord's son was comming back. Of course, the Mahant denied that Kesari was there. Your father had to mortgage some land, they say, to pay the fees of the lawyer who defended Sharm Singh, but the boy was hanged at Manabad jail last Monday. And your father has collapsed . . . .'

Lalu looked at Jhandu as if he were deaf and dumb. Then he opened his mouth to say something, to utter a cry, but he only moaned a half-suppressed moan, 'Horrible!' And a few tears came to his eyes. And he ran, sweating and dazed, mad and yet conscious of the cows squealing in the houses about him, of the peasants and the shopkeepers smoking in the dimly lit, noisy bazaar, of the mud-houses, eternal and unchanged, and yet somehow smaller to his gaze now than they had been before he left the village.

As he reached the wooden threshold of his father's house, Gujri, who had been apprised by scampering children of Lalu's arrival, leapt at him, shrieking hysterically, 'Oh, my son! Oh, my son!'

And flinging her arms about him she sobbed and groaned and wailed with long persistent howls till the people from the house came clamouring round her, consoling, remonstrating, insistent and importunate. And they dragged the boy in with her.

Over the night of Lalu's brain the weird spells of nothingness beat back waves of irritation and an indefinable distress. Over the night of his consciousness, past the lights and shadows of brass utensils in the alcoves, past the pitchers of grain and foodstuffs, over the night of his soul, in full view

of the white shroud in which the old man lay covered on the earth where he had been ceremoniously lowered from his bed, a babble of talk rose and fell. In the glimmering of the cotton wick, he could see his father's face quivering, now purple pale, now coffee black, now a burnt-up red as if it were changing colour in the struggle of life against death.

Then the long suspense of his journey home and the nausea he had felt in his belly since he heard the news from Jhandu seemed to evaporate and crystallize into a realization of what was happening.

The hard small brave face loomed before his eyes, ugly like a skeleton which is still covered with flesh. And he was repelled by it and yet fascinated. He felt a pang of remorse that he should feel no tenderness for his father, and shivered. His mother still leant on his shoulder and he sought to withdraw from her and to open his mouth to say something. But she clung to him sobbing, 'Oh! my son! Oh, my son!' He caressed her distractedly and turned his head away, invoking pity from behind his discomfort to come and console her. But she cried, and her voice echoed down the barn in a long, piercing, helpless wail of frustrated hope and despair.

'Oh, Gujri, let him go,' Harnam Singh said, 'He has come back now, he is here with us.'

'But he will not stay,' she moaned. 'His going was the undoing of us all.' And she sobbed hysterically, with loud shrieks and a breaking voice.

'Oh, don't talk like that, may he live long! Oh, don't say that! Sukhi Sandi! May such a thing never come to pass. Let the boy rest,' said Ajit Kaur, raising her voice above the chorus of the other women who huddled close to each other in the dusk.

Harnam Singh rose and began to separate Gujri from Lalu.

'Hai, my son! Hai!' the old woman caried as, with a face wrinkled and spent with suffering, she fell away, wiping her eyes with the hem of her apron.

Lal Singh groped towards the taper's shrine which

illuminated the form of his father into something eerily alone.

His brain was dizzy with the fragrance of thup, a purifying insense that burnt in a pan near the old man's head. The blood was coursing in his veins fast, and he could hear his heart beat against his side with a dull thud thud. But he didn't know what to do, how to pay his respects to his father, for the old man's feet, from which he should have taken the imaginary dust to his forehead with his right hand, were covered and lay on the other side. Should he touch the forehead and pay his respects that way, while pretending to feel how hot the forehead was? Or should he touch the neck?

He bent down and felt a hot sigh break from the purple lips, followed by a convulsion which twisted the old man's face and rocked him from side to side.

'Is this Lalu? Have you come, son?' Nihal Singh said, lifting his voice from the depths of the dark. And then, as if the face of his son had glided like some transcendental light into the texture of his brain and renewed his battle against the hosts of Yama that challenged him, he began to murmur verses from the Japji.

'This world of action . . the world of . . . lives by energy.

In it there are found none else,

But the heroes . . . heroes . . . heroes . . . mighty and brave.

Who are brimming with the spirit of God . . . .'

'Sat bachan, sat bachan,' whispered Dayal Singh, who sat in the lotus seat at the old man's feet, with the Guru Granth open before him. And then he raised his voice: ' "In the beginning was the Real, in the beginning of the ages was the Real. The Real, O Nanak, is and also will be". . . .'

Lal Singh contemplated the old man's sweating face with an anxious stare. Nihalu's lower jaw was hardening under the shaggy overgrowth of his grey beard. His eyes were almost bulging out of the sockets. His nose twitched as if he had taken snuff. The boy was afraid that his

father was breathing his last. He felt afraid that he would be considered responsible for the old man's death, and he prayed in his soul that his father be spared if only for the while.

But the old man was muttering now in an effortless, husky voice, 'Sat Nam! The name of God is Truth! Sat Nam! Have you eaten any food, my son?'

'Bapu, I am all right,' said Lal Singh, and smiled to rediscover the mixture of heavenly sentiments with worldly cares which had always characterized the atmosphere of his home.

'The Mother of Sharm Singh,' the old man continued, without listening to the boy's answer, 'give Lalu some food. He must be tired after—' And here his voice seemed to choke, his eyeballs rolled and he began to pant for breath.

'Hai, hai! Hai, hai!' Gujri cried, beating her breasts.

'Hai, hai! Hai, hai!' Ajit Kaur wailed.

'Hai, hai, hai, hai!' cried the females who crowded round the death-bed.

'Go and call the Hakimji, Harnam Singh,' someone shouted.

The darkening length of the barn seemed to become tense with the shock of these raucous-voiced, grim, yet moving dithyrambs. The old man's body rocked to and fro as if he were aching for relief in his terrible agony, and his face trembled. But he lifted his head, opened his mouth and spat out a thick phlegm on his side, and sighing deeply, began to murmur to himself again, 'Said Nanak, "If you exert yourself to action, you will be saved." Said the Guru, "if you . . ." Said the Guru, "serve your God and remember Him. . .leaving all your pride of self." Son, you sit down and eat and tell me how things are in the army.'

Lal Singh was drawn to his father now with a pitying affection. He had never been near a dying man before.

Suddenly he bent over the old man and pressed his limbs, slowly, delicately, inspired by a love such as he had never before felt for his father; for the dirty, old, praying,

coughing, belching, swearing, hard, ruthless tyrant who had beaten him and whose death he had so often longed for. As he knelt over the warm, feverish limbs of the sick man, as he caressed the body which he had not touched for years, he felt the delirium of a rippling breath arise in his belly and choke his throat till his eyes were filled with tears.

'Han, son, tell me of your paltan, tell me have you been keeping well?' the old man asked, feeling his son's touch and filled with a curious pride that seemed to give him a new lease of life.

Lal Singh was now sobbing with tenderness. And even as he wept he was happy that he was, after all, capable of tenderness, of love.

'The spring has been. . .so nice . . . this year,' the old man said, in a hoarse, high-pitched voice that trembled on his lips like a broken prophecy. 'There was a good harvest, son. You should have seen the rich green corn waving with the cool winds. But that marriage didn't happen. "The house burned down at the betrothal : lightning struck the wedding". And Sharm Singh is gone before me, though I sold three acres of land to Fazlu, arain, to have him defended by Raizada Rikhi Ram, the big lawyer.

'I have had rheumatics and my back seems to have broken ever since. I could not do anything or feel the change of air and water, in the lengthening days. I just lay because I felt doomed. . . .They say things are not going well with the village.'

After this he coughed long and dangerously, and the faces of the onlookers paled, but he turned his head to Lalu again and resumed his babblings.

'Son,' he murmured, 'I too have been a soldier. I could not wait, I could not wait for the orders of the jarnel. I rushed out through the reeds and the long grass in the swamp, son, I rushed out with the name of Guru Govind in my heart and my sword in my hand. And I killed him son, I killed him with the name of Wah Guru on my lips. Don't think I was afraid, son, I was a soldier too, once, and I would have killed them all, but they were eating, and the Gurus have ordained that no man shall be disturbed when he

is engaged in the ritual of feeding the higher self.'

'Acha, acha, Bapu, you rest,' Lalu wanted to quieten his father.

But the old man continued frighteningly, 'I was a soldier once, son, I was a soldier just as you. And so were our ancestors, soldiers of the Panth. And we have done some deeds surely. We can boast of age and honour.

'I was as old as you then, and I rushed out ahead of the Khalsa, rushed out shouting, "Sat Sri Akal," and, "Guru Govind Singh ki Jai." And we scattered the red faces till they retreated, flying, falling, falling before the swords of the Akalis.

'And when a column of ferungis came to the rescue of their men, I did some deeds, son, I did some deeds. I fought them single-handed, two men, twice my size, and killed them, and only then rushed forward to take cover behind a hillock within a hundred hands of the enemy. . . .'

'Get up, ohe, Lal Singha,' came Harnam Singh's voice from behind him, kinder than before. 'Get up and make room for the Hakim Sahib.'

And he ushered into the room a little old man, with a pale, snub-nosed, flat face, round which was a well-kept beard of which every hair seemed to stand out distinct. He was clad in baggy trousers, a long closed-collar coat, gold-work shoes and a green silk turban bound over a red velvet kulah. Lal Singh knew him to be Muhammad Ali, the Mulah whom he had always seen leading the Friday prayers in the village mosque and who also practised a mixture of the indigenous and the Greek systems of medicine. A pious man with orthodox views, he commanded respect among the peasants in spite of his ridiculous bearing, though Ghulam and the younger generation of the village muslims having suffered from the vicious cane he kept soaked in urine in order to beat the boys who came to learn the Koran by rote in the primitive mosque school, felt differently about him.

Lalu moved aside to make room for the medicine-man, saying, 'Salaam Maulvi Sahib,' and stood by.

Gujri, who would under ordinary circumstances have resented the entrance of a Muhammadan into the barn through the kitchen, just contented herself with lifting the shoes which the Maulvi had discarded at the door by means of a stick and throwing them into the courtyard.

Maulvi Muhammad Ali crouched by the old man and felt the pulse of the shrivelled hand. Then he touched Nihalu's brow and seemed to become lost in protracted meditations.

'Tell us, Pirji,' said Gujri, modestly covering her old head more fully with her apron.

The old man moaned and trembled as if the agony of a dire ague was going through him, and his eyes blinked in the darkness.

'Well, mother,' said the Maulvi, 'you should offer the sacrifice of a goat to the shrine of Shamus Tabriz in the mosque and I will give him a potion to ease the pain in his back. But is the amulet I gave you to tie round his arm still there?' And he proceeded to feel for it, saying, 'I will write a new one tomorrow.'

'Meanwhile, what is his condition, Maulviji?' asked Harnam Singh.

'Son, everything is in the hands of Allah,' replied the Maulvi, 'and man is impotent before the wrath of the Almighty. Baba Nihalu may hold out a day, he may hold out a month, or he may expire in a moment.'

'Do you think, Pirji, that we can put him back on the bed?' asked Dayal Singh. 'His feet are cold but his fever seems to have abated.'

'Han, han,' said the Maulvi abstractedly, not because he thought that the fever had abated but because to the Muhammadan it was all one whether a man died in his bed or on the earth. And then with the gravity and reserve with which he had entered he got up to go, saying as he proceeded : 'It is time for my prayers, call me again if his condition doesn't improve, but I want to offer special supplications to God for his soul, for it is a full-moon night and very propitious in every way.'

'Let us lift father to the bed, Harnam Singha, before

you go to get the potion from the Maulviji,' said Dayal Singh.

'I will go with Maulviji. Harnam Singh can stay and help,' Lalu said, softening in his concern for the old man so as to abandon all his scruples against the Maulvi for the while.

'No, son, you stay and eat some food,' said Gujri. 'Have a bath and cool down the sweat of the journey. And go to sleep, you must be tired.'

'It is not far,' the boy said. 'I can go.'

Gujri did not protest as, whatever her concern for her son, her belief in the efficacy of the Maulvi's ministrations was too desperately insistent.

XXIX

LALU walked out of the barn to find Muhammad Ali groping for his shoes which lay like two dark boats floating in the dust which was transmuted by the moon into a river of yellow light.

'May the Devil and his hosts disperse, Nihalu is not yet ready to yield up the ghost,' the Maulvi murmured like an incantation as if he believed the jinns and demons of hell might be abroad waiting to take the spirit of the old man to the nether worlds. And he belched a long rumbling wind, cleared his throat as if he were afraid and wanted to make a noise to keep him company, and then brushed the streaks of his beard and departed.

Lalu gazed for a moment at the square cowshed by the hall where he had been chopping up fodder just before he had left home. Thiba and Rondu and the buffalo Suchi apparently recognized his presence, for they mooed and lowed and called to him, But a beetle hummed by the loose wheels of a cart which stood by the farming implements in the corner by the hall, enveloped in the smoke of cow-dung fire that always smouldered in a pit to prevent mosquitoes and flies from congregating in the cowshed. And the animals quietened as they sniffed at the air.

He stood and listened and felt as if everything had lapsed for a moment, as if the moon, the full red moon had dissolved all nature into the eerie, insubstantial stillness of a void. Then there were anxious whispers in the barn and the rumbling of thunderous coughs and broken jagged talk on the flat roofs of the mud-houses where people sat gasping for air as they ate or talked before going to sleep.

He had known the slightest movement of this world and yet after a period of only five months every element seemed strange. He felt he had grown older, had become part of a different world by going to live in a cantonment. Even his flesh seemed to tingle with sweat in a way in which it had never tingled in the old days, and the creeping shadow of his form fell on the walls strangely. He was afraid of his own ghost and of the spirits of the village in the dark. He felt he had assumed a new mask.

He hurried through the hall and followed the Maulvi who was hopping from foot to foot, carefully negotiating his steps in order to avoid plunging into the foetid drain which ran like a long, scaly snake in the middle of the narrow, uneven gully. He felt he wanted to sing the refrain of some poignant song. But he couldn't remember an appropriate rhythm, though he began to hum a few notes.

But the fatuity of his attempt to sing embarrassed him. And he walked along, his eyes seared by the fatigue of the day, his body clammy with sweat under the new cotton shirt and tight white trousers of the mufti he was wearing, his feet aching in the shoes as they fell in the ruts of the way.

He phewed a hot breath, then looked round to see if anyone was about. But apart from the clumsy little Maulvi ahead of him, there was no one in the alley. Lalu bent his head to the path, relieved, as he would have had to join hands and answer endless questions about life in the army if one of the villagers had recognized him. He could not have borne too much kindness and pity at this juncture. He couldn't have been natural even if he had met one of his cronies. He felt dazed, blinded, impris-

oned in his remorse for the family's suffering—alone.

'Allah ho Akbar! Allah ho Akbar!' the deep musical cry rang out from near the miniature tower on the roof of the brick-built mosque by the weavers' lane, and Maulvi Muhammad Ali lifted his hind feet like a duck out of water and rushed through the gateway without a word to Lalu, as if he would miss his chance of entering the kingdom of God if he tarried.

The boy stood at the gate of the building, completely baffled, by his own negligence in not keeping abreast of the Maulvi. Should he wait or should he call back? he asked himself. He was debarred from entering into the Muslim Holy of Holies where the congregation was already rising and kneeling, kneeling and rising, bending and unbending, in prayer. He stood there, feeling a fool, and afraid that he might be taken for a thief.

A dove fluttered in the niche of the door, frightened by the shouting and the raving, the bawling and the braying of the Muezzin and then flew over Lal Singh's head towards the fields beyond the last row of sleeping cowherds. A mist of lilac, opal and violet arose and the cry of a beetle in the swamps broke the stillness. A slight breeze stirred among the hedges beyond the weavers' lane and bore the whispering grief of a sigh from Lalu's mouth to the tall grasses that shone on the borders of the field.

The boy gave the Maulvi up and began to move out to the slopes which ascended on the far side to the barren field on the top of which stood the monastery. The cries of the night-watchman on Harbans Singh's estates came from afar and the barking of dogs like strange unearthly yells in the suffocating stillness. And he espied the form of Chandi, the witch-woman, with her lean hounds, tottering over the cremation-ground, her hair streaming in the wind. He started when a frog croaked a sudden, hoarse croak as if it were breathing a last little breath before being swallowed up. His mouth dried and his face was soaking with perspiration as he edged away out of reach of the creeping monster which had come to obstruct his passage. He stood

shaking as he gained the edge of a boulder, conscious of his cowardice and yet unable to control the trembling of his legs.

He looked at the moon and tried to recognize the profile which his mother had taught him to identify in his childhood as the face of the moon god. As soon as the lines of the long nose and the thin lips formed before his eyes, he averted his gaze from the sense of fear which the daemon with a twisted smile on his silly face had always given him.

Just at that moment an owl wailed a long-drawn-out, melancholy wail from somewhere near the monastery. Lalu shook nervously and looked about him, for he felt as if the ghosts of Sharm Singh and of Hardit and of all the other dead of the village, of the saints in the monastery as well as of the gods, were gathering round him.

But he could not steady himself. A sense of doom was creeping into him, a sense of fear and abject horror of the dark, unknown forces of this old world that weighed heavily on everything, even on him who had seen the new things and didn't believe in superstition or in the hosts of dark forces, of ghosts, gods, hobgoblins and the incarnations of lost souls.

As he threaded his way gingerly across the track, he became conscious of the weariness of his body and thought of the far-away plain where the 'Lights Out' would have sounded by now and where he would have been asleep on his cot in the verandah.

'Of course, it is not a bed of roses in the army,' he said to himself as he had often said before in retrospect. And once again he recalled those first days of horror which he had gone through. The humiliations of that naked living before a hundred prying eyes, of having to hear crude jokes and vulgar abuse, day and night. And the aggressive superiority of the seniors in the lines, in the kitchen, on the well and even in the queue before the latrines. The humiliation of being kicked by Lok Nath without daring to utter a protest. The persistence with which the lance-corporal had hounded him just because he had dared to hold his head high and had earned the favour of Owen Sahib and

Havildar Lachman Singh. The cunning with which he had invented minor excuses to vent his spleen and wreak his vengeance.

Still, he had signed up now, he told himself. And in spite of everything, it was better for him perhaps to be in the army for some time. Perhaps it was better to live in the cantonment than to have to live here under the shadow of Harbans Singh's omnipresent hatred, and to face the contempt of the elders and the nightmare of horrors visible and invisible in the village.

Perhaps he could save more money out of his pay in the army and come back to the land, clear off all the mortgages of jewellery and debt. But it couldn't be just yet.

XXX

AS HE caught sight of his house again he felt a return of the embarrassment which had possessed him at first on his arrival in the face of a grim death-haunted room. But he made a bold leap into the dark hall, determined to escape to sleep on the top of the cowshed where his cot used to be before he left home.

'The Maulvi ran into the mosque to say his prayers and hasn't yet come out, so brother Dayal Singh will have to go to get the potion after all,' he gabbled to his mother who was collecting things in the outdoor kitchen.

'Acha, son, you come and drink some milk and rest.' Gujri said, pouting her mouth tenderly. 'I have laid your old bed on the cowshed. You sleep away from the ghosts who are crowding round the barn. May I be your sacrifice. . . .'

'I will go up then,' Lalu said, and hesitated tensely, as he didn't know how to communicate his partiality to his mother. Then he crossed the courtyard and walked up the precarious bamboo steps, which people use to climb to the top of the houses in the villages.

As he stood smoothing his bed, Harnam Singh, who

now lay on the roof of his room which backed on to the cowshed, called out to see if it were Lal Singh. For he had not had a chance to talk to the boy near the death-bed.

'You are wearing very nice clothes, Lalu. Is the life good in the army?' he asked, coming over to the low wall that separated the two roofs.

'Uncle,' Lalu said, 'if a regular salary is better than the uncertainty of waiting for fate to send a few showers, and some kind of management is better than our old ways. Besides, "a good fox has two dens".'

And then he half-regretted his reply as he felt that his words were tinged with a deliberately exaggerated enthusiasm. But his pride wouldn't let him qualify his statement.

'Sitting idle in the barracks is better than worthless work here, anyhow,' said Harnam Singh. For he only saw in army life a long round of pleasure, with good pay and wonderful clothes, and all the privileges of travelling with free passes and of being able to bully civilians into silence by a mere gesture.

'Why, Uncle,' said Lalu, 'aren't things going well here? What kind of prices did you get for the autumn harvest?'

'No prices at all, son,' said Harnam Singh bitterly. "Blind king, dark city." The merchants in the town say that the Sarkar is responsible.'

'Thugs! These merchants!' Lalu said.

'Well, it is a question of earn and eat or go hungry,' said Harnam Singh, contemplating the sheen of the tight white trousers which Lalu was trying to take off. Then suddenly he became silent.

'What is the matter, Uncle. What has happened?'

Harnam Singh looked about him, sighed and said : 'Nothing, son . . . only I am ruined. I have had to mortgage the whole of my land to Chaman Lal. But I am not the only one, almost the whole village is ruined.'

There was the sound of someone coming up the steps at that moment, and Harnam Singh said : 'No matter, son, you rest. We will talk tomorrow.'

'Lalu, my son,' came a sighing voice, and Gujri showed up with a tumbler of milk which she had brought for the boy.

'You must have tomorrow's meal with us,' said Harnam Singh, changing the subject and seeking to lift the weight of the gloom he thought he had cast on Lalu with an instinctive cordiality and hospitality which had not deserted him in spite of the falling prices.

'No Harnam Singh,' protested Gujri, 'no, he has not had a meal in his own home yet.'

'But Baba Nihalu is ill and it will be as well,' said Harnam Singh. 'And my home is his home too, isn't it?'

'The father of Jitu,' the voice of Harnam Singh's wife came, 'the cow is not tied properly, and you know how many thieves are about. Come and lock up.'

'Acha, acha,' Harnam Singh answered. But before he descended he turned to Lal Singh and said : 'We will talk in the morning as you must be tired now. And don't forget you are to eat with us tomorrow.'

'Acha, son, accept his invitation,' said Gujri, with a pout. 'It is the same thing wherever you eat. The biggest thing is that you have come back. It has cooled the heat of my eyes which were tired of looking towards the way of you would come.'

'Now you go and rest too, Mother,' Lal Singh said shyly.

And he averted his eyes and looked away as he couldn't bear the tenderness which welled up in his chest. But he suddenly felt his mother's soft, warm hand on his forehead and he looked towards her with tears in his eyes, and said with trembling lips, 'You must not worry about me, Mother.'

'I thought I would die without seeing you again,' Gujri said, wiping her own eyes and his with her apron. 'I didn't know where you had gone, my son, or what had happened to you. Sharm Singh . . . .' But she couldn't go on and began to sob.

Lalu felt choked and couldn't move his lips to utter even a breath. And he abandoned himself, dazed and

empty, to the quivering warmth of his mother's sobs.

At length Gujri's sobs spluttered into cries and she stroked his shoulders with loving hands and said, 'You must forgive your foolish old mother. Her only fault is that she loves you.' Then she clutched her apron and went down the steps.

He lay down on his back, his arms outstretched, his legs apart, his face fragrant with the touch of a breeze, while the back of his head throbbed with the heat that oozed from everything.

For a long time his mind was an utter blank, and he could only feel the wooden frame of the cot, hard and meaningless near his hands, and see three odd things written before his eyes : 'Sharm Singh is dead, Bapu is dying and Harnam Singh is ruined.'

The drowsiness of fatigue spread over his limbs and, as his eyes scanned the myriads of stars in the sky, the darkness of sleep descended upon his tired lashes, though the still cries within him would not fade.

He closed his eyes, as if he were afraid for his life, and tried to blot out the horned images of the God of Death and the hosts of half-living, half-dead, a squint-eyed, toothless deformities of the air that crowded round his head. The vision of Sharm Singh's dead face arose before him and then the picture of his father, lying under the light of the taper, the wrinkled forehead over the glinting eyes and the widely-dilated nostrils, the hollowed cheeks and the ears which stood out large and attentive, as if they were alive to all the murmurs from his failing pulse to the babbling of those about him. And then there was Harnam Singh lying next door involved in his own misery.

What had happened? How had it come about that he too had mortgaged his land? He wished his mother hadn't come upon the scene and then he could have asked him. For he felt responsible.

He turned to and fro restlessly, sighing in vain for sleep.

At length he turned his head aside and gave up the struggle.

And at long last a languorous mist stole softly over his agitated brain and stilled him to sleep.

XXXI

LALU had lain dreaming of a land of colossal giants in a mountainous country where he was the only man who had been admitted because he could juggle with cards, perform feats of physical strengh such as balancing an elephant on his nose and having a stone of a hundred tons beaten on his belly. He was actually balancing an elephant on his nose before an audience of open-eyed, wonder-struck peasants when suddenly the beast slipped. And he awoke in a panic to find Gughi tickling his nose with a straw in the familiar manner of old days, while Churanji was pushing him from beneath the bed, and Ghulam heaping on his body all the clothes which he had thrown off in his sleep. He rubbed his eyes and yawned heavily and got up with a violent shaking of his limbs.

The sun was shining with a jocund brilliance and the world was already plunged in a vapour bath.

Lalu smiled at his discomfiture, caught Gughi's arm, jumped on the bed over Churanji's hump and legged Ghulam, all at the same time.

'Come, son, tell us how things are in the army?' Gughi said. 'I hear you have become a Lat Sahib.'

'I will tell you everything by and by,' Lalu said, 'but first you tell me about your health as you wriggle in the grasp of my hand.' And he twisted his friend's wrist playfully till the boy begged and prayed for release.

Then they all laughed and looked at each other and Ghulam asked, 'Really, tell us, yar, have you been well?'

'How do I look?' Lalu asked, and began to get ready to go to the fields with the boys to answer the call of nature as he used to do during the holidays.

'You look like a horse now, though you looked like an ass before you joined the army,' Gughi said cheekily.

'Tell us, do you get lots of nice food in the paltan?'

asked Churanji.

But before telling them much he turned to his mother in the courtyard, an unspoken inquiry in his eyes.

'Your Bapu is better, son,' she said. 'He is asleep though he still has fever. You go with the boys and perform your ablutions and come back for some whey.'

He walked out of the house into the lane and, released from the strain of the old man's illness, he felt he should open out to his friends.

Instead, he found himself becoming graver and graver. And he felt he could be no longer the simple crony of Gughi, Ghulam and Churanji. They were running mad for the sheer joy of meeting him. Gughi was describing enthusiastically how they had tried to take their revenge against the landlord. They had planned to frighten him at night with a mock snake they had made of thick rope. They had put this in his way when he was coming home from a banquet at Manabad, and old Harbans Singh had sought to have them all whipped by their fathers aften he had leaped out of his carriage and run shouting and crying with fear before their laughing eyes.

Lalu listened with amusement but he felt himself choking with disgust. For though his face was warm with happiness at meeting his friends and walking on the old earth, which blossomed with the promise of a new harvest of cotton and sugar-cane and millet, he felt that he was now only a passer-by.

The boys thought it must be the illness of his father and the news of Sharm Singh's fate that made Lalu silent. And they tried not to notice his reserve as they ran and capered and flew like the sparrows that chirped among the shades of the trees.

'Let us pay our homage to the Almighty,' said Gughi, plunging into a millet field and sitting down to relieve himself.

Churanji followed suit and could be heard loudly.

'Stuff yourself up with lentils a little more, swine,' shouted Ghulam. 'Like father, like son. He belches wind in the shop all day as if his bottom were a big gun announcing the

passing of each minute, and you will outdo him when you grow up. Why can't you eat a little meat? You have piled up enough money.'

Lalu edged away, laughing at Ghulam's mocking outburst.

When they collected at the only well that was running, on a farm about half a mile away, near the gazing-ground which was by the swamps below the hills, the sun was drenching the earth with a flood of light. And Lalu felt all the ghosts which had lingered through the night fading before the splendour of the morni ng.

Having teased Ghulam by throwing him across Churanji, who bent his back like a horse immediately behind the weaver boy, Gughi ran and climbed like a monkey up a kikar tree and then sought forgiveness by bartering a few sticks which he had cut for toothbrushes.

Lalu came and sat talking to Harnam Singh, who had just finished bathing and was waiting for his son to come back from where he had strayed playing with some boys in the fields.

'So you fare sumptuosly while we starve,' Harnam Singh said congratulating his nephew.

'Uncle,' said Lalu. ' "Your own wisdom and another's wealth always seem great".'

'Even so,' said Harnam Singh, 'half a loaf is better than a hungry belly.'

'Except that leaving half to seek the whole, you will drown without finding bottom,' said Lalu. 'But tell me, Uncle, what happened to your crop?'

'Child, how can I tell ?' began Harnam Singh diffidently, shaking himself out of his misery. ' "The blind man eats many flies", and we peasants are blind folk even though we have eyes. The Sarkar should know how to regulate prices and should give guarantees to the farmer against the cheapening of the market. How are we ignorant folk to know the market conditions beforehand? How can we plan the crops so as not to produce too much or too little? But the Sarkar will not do a thing. It merely sends down the patwari to collect rent and takes money on the yield

without bothering about what prices the grain has fetched. Yet when I complained to the tehsildar about it, he said, "Bad conditions will give you a better sense of the value of money".

'As I told you before, I have had to mortgage the whole of my six acres to Chaman Lal, to pay the land rent and to have a little money on hand for the seed. I am done for. Anything may happen. Most of what I grow will go to the sahukar as interest, and there will never be any paying back of the capital for years. But what could I do? He wouldn't lend without security except at a rate of interest which was impossible. This was a cheap loan, but at what cost. Everyone knows it and is ready to throw bricks at us. Our evil brotherhood has been talking of the decay of the family and spreading calumnies about Baba Nihalu because he sold three acres to Fazlu to pay for the defence of Sharm Singh.

'And yet most of the people have themselves pledged land or jewellery on the quiet. You know those two devout, dried-up cronies of the Mahant and the landlord, Bhagwant Singh and Gurmukh Singh—well, their land has been bought up, half by Nandgir and half by Harbans Singh, because it appears that they had mortgaged it secretly and couldn't pay the interest on the deed.

'The same thing has happened all over the district. And to my shame I have had to take a part-time job as a labourer at the Power House. And now Jitu will never be married, for who will give his daughter to the son of a bankrupt coolie? I only wish I had rented the land out and gone to the army to earn a little money. For at least I would still have been able to call my land my own, and to hold my head high. Hai, Wah Guru! Wah Guru! And having delivered himself of his bitterness he averted his face to hide the tears that came into his eyes and then sank back into a resigned despair.

'There is no saving of money in the army,' said Lalu. 'Perhaps it is best to be too poor to be able to borrow and work for someone.'

'Son, the fault lies with us folk, perhaps,' said Harnam

Singh. 'The senses of all the village folk have left them. Now look at the family of Jiwan Singh, the owner of this well. He is farming his land in midsummer to the waste of soil on money borrowed from Harbans Singh. Jiwan Singh's brother, Ladha Singh, has already had to go away to work in the mills at Sherkot and has left the land.

'When I was passing through Sherkot, I went to see him and he was living in such dirt and filth, with seven other people in the same room. Some of them were clad in rags of quilts with their beds spread on the floor! I thought then that it were better to die than to be so degraded. Of course, he made a great show of well-being and bought sugar-plums to entertain me, but I knew he had not enough to buy coarse bread once a day, let alone sending money home!

'And yet what can they do? What can anyone do?' And with the cloud of a frown on his forehead, he went, the flesh appreciably reduced on his giant frame since Lalu had last seen him.

'I don't care what happens, I am coming with you, Lalu brother,' Gughi said. 'I would like to be able to wear uniform in the village rather than drive a yekka.' And he began to roll about, kicking his legs in the air and shouting, 'I will show you all. I will show you. I shall wear a uniform one day and walk right into the streets of this village with a rifle in my hand.'

'Of course you will, my son,' said Harnam Singh. 'A fool's arrow is soon shot.'

'Han,' retorted Gughi with deliberate mockery, 'fools grow without being watered.'

Churanji chuckled at the joke as he sat listening, half-embarrassed, to the talk in which he, the well-cared-for son of a wealthy father, had no share.

'Don't forget you are eating "the food of the Gods" with us,' said Harnam Singh as he came back and got ready to go. 'And if you see Jitu, send him home, for he must go and get some shopping done before noon, because I have got to be at the Power House at six o'clock. I must try and buy a watch soon, because the foreman abuses us if we

are late by the breadth of a moment, and Hendry Sahib growls.'

'I hear that a bugle blows at ten every night, giving the order for everyone to sleep in the army,' said Ghulam as he sat chewing his stick of a toothbrush, and then again to wake you up in the morning.'

'Still, tell me,' Gughi insisted. 'Is there a school there for the soldiers, and can everyone play games?'

'Of course, your bed is studded with diamonds and your clothes are made of velvet and you drink nectar and eat ambrosia,' Lalu said, seeking to stifle Gughi's naivete, but then he thought that he might have hurt him and laughed to soften the irony.

'Let us go and eat mangoes in the grove by the swamp after we have bathed,' said Churanji.

'Han, we will tease the "mother of dogs". She has got a hut near the cremation ground nowadays,' said Gughi.

'But not now,' said Lalu. 'In the afternoon, perhaps. The condition of the old man may be bad.'

This rather damped the spirits of the party and they all hurried through thier ablutions and even the most extravagant gestures of the irrepressible Gughi could scarcely evoke a smile.

As the boys returned to the village, the burning incandescence of the day cast an oppressive weight upon them and enveloped them in a deeper silence.

But the condition of the old man was not too grave when Lalu reached home. Nihalu had had a good night's sleep and lay weak but conscious. He had been lifted back to bed. His breathing was regular and he murmured the morning's prayer without moaning as he had done the previous night.

Dayal Singh was making a special recitation of the Guru Granth for the old man's benefit as he sat in the alcove where the great big book lay swathed in velvet under the canopy of gold-brocaded silk, and Sharm Singh's widow, Kesari, was waving a horsehair whisk with a silver handle over her brother-in-law and on the book as she crouched piously behind.

Gujri had just finished beating the curds for butter and was getting ready to minister to everyone's belly.

Lalu drank his portion of whey and went into the barn to attend to the old man's wants.

XXXII

DURING the next few days Lalu spent himself relentlessly in the service of his father. He began to forget the troubles of army life and mingled with the household as he had seldom done since his childhood. Certain things like the tragedy of Sharm Singh were not mentioned in the house. And a sense of oppression seemed to hang like a thundercloud in the atmosphere. But there was a great deal to do in the fields as well as at home, and he buried himself in work, avoiding the village folk as much as he could.

The old man knew he was dying, and yet he refused to die. In the darkness of his fever-tossed, delirious body he sought for all the hymns and prayers that had strengthened his faith in the past. He would dive boldly into the mystery of futurity and battle with the desolation that filled his soul. He would plunge into the past and drag out the reminiscences of his glorious triumphs and mournful failures. And he would chant snatches of hymns and prayers in the grave, heart-stricken silence of the barn, so that the repetition of them might bring him enough merit to excuse him from answering the call of the God of Death who knocked at the door of his being.

But sometimes he would sink into a sullen, ominous silence, a silence so deep, so fraught with danger that it seemed to be on the point of bursting with a terrible evil cry from some subterranean hell.

And he was sometimes unconscious and babbled like a child in a nightmare, as if he were fighting the hosts of darkness in the nether worlds. And his limbs twitched continually and the ghastly hue of a purple sky at sunset covered his face, so that everyone rushed to him, ready to lower him to the bare earth before he had breathed his last.

But a sharp jerk of his head, and his eyes opened hard like diamonds, glinting angrily. His body rose in a curve, his hands stiffened and he shouted, 'Sat Sri Akal,' as if he had just come back, sword in hand, from the field of battle, calling the war-call as he had done at Aliwal, shouting defiance to the enemies of the Panth and the Sikh Raj and death to the traitors who had usurped his land. And the welling of these passions seemed to transform his body into the embodiment of undying energy.

The naive, instinctive faith of his nature was being eaten away, however, by the worm of doubt that grew in his belly.

'One day I must die.' The thought hovered before him continuously. And yet there was the suit to win, the jewellery to redeem from the mortgagee, the two boys to marry off, so that he might be able to see his sons' sons flourish, perpetuate his race, so that he could pass on the name of his forefathers to his children, custodians of his memory.

'One day I must die . . . but not now . . . not now.'

And he talked to Lalu of the days of his youth when he had raised good harvests and filled the barn to overflowing with grain and with pitchers of money, when he had three cows and a horse tied in the courtyard, and had bought and sold at the proper season, and turned a good balance between profit and loss. He talked to the boy about the time when the seeds of their present misfortunes were sown, of when the ferungis came with their railgadis which took away the grain from the villages at the lowest prices. The ferungis, the ferungis Money. For he could never forgive the ferungis for all the new-fangled machines they had brought in, the heavy taxes they levied in money and their bad justice.

Lalu told him of how kind the Ajitan Sahib of his regiment had been to him, and said that some of the machines he had seen were wonderful.

But the old man was not interested in his son's praise of all these toys, regarding his words as the impetuous talk of a youngster who had been seduced by the superficial amenities of city life.

And he launched forth on long stories of the Gurus of Sikhism, and histories of the men and women of villages around, of the crops they had raised and the battles they had fought, telling the tales with a knowingness and a burning, fanatical belief in himself and in the traditions of his religion as if he were uttering prophecies which he wanted to pass on for the benefit of his successors before his death.

'They are heretics, those who side with the Angrezi Sarkar. They are traitors who sold the Sikh Raj. And they will come to a bad end if they learn to practise the machinations of the Devil as those ferungis have learnt to practise them. They will destroy all truth and honesty and they will sell their souls for gain, not knowing that they can't take their savings on their chests when they go to the beyond. Money is the biggest curse of mankind.'

And driven by the zest of his enthusiasms, he wanted to walk out and live again, to bring in the new harvest and to fight the old fox of a landlord.

'Tell me, Maulvi,' he said to the medicine man, 'is there no potion by which I can live to be a hundred. For I fought for the Khalsa and lost, and I fought against the traitors who betrayed the Khalsa and lost, but if I could only live a little longer, I could bring my enemies to bay.'

'It is all in the hands of Allah,' the Maulvi said. 'He is the creator and no man can simulate his functions.'

'But I have fought for truth, I have fought for right, surely I shall be immortal,' the old man said in a panic.

'According to my religion, you will soon have to stand before God on the Judgment Day,' said the Maulvi. 'And since you are an infidel, the Prophet cannot intercede on your behalf. The first Guru, Nanak, was an admirer of Muhammad, however, and that may count in your favour.'

'But each day in life is judgment day,' burst Lalu, impatient at the Maulvi's words. 'And surely there is no favouritism shown to men in heaven, if there be such a place, just because men belong to one religion or another.'

'You are a child, my son,' the Maulvi said with a contemptuous flourish of his hand. 'You don't know the

ways of God or man. The Prophet Muhammad was the special Messenger of God and he will only intercede on behalf of those who have accepted his faith, while others will suffer the tortures of hell.'

'Will not even my name live after me then?' the old man cried, abject and craven.

'Your sons will carry on your good name,' Gujri assured him with tears in her eyes, distressed to see his mouth weakening. 'Don't talk as if you are dead and all of us are dead. Sukhi Sandi!'

And she came over after her remonstrance and pressed his head, with a beatific light in her face, that quivered with tenderness as it was seized by fear and contracted at the evil omen of the words.

'May such a thing never come to pass,' Kesari said shyly, as she sat quietly at his feet, effacing herself and silent in her own distress. She had become strange and inanimate, yet warm, in spite of her widowhood; curiously untouched by the tongues of gossips that wagged round the village and by the terrible suffering that had come to her through her husband's death, inert, yet still alive with the fragrance of life in her breath.

And the old man seemed to quieten somewhat as if the warm touch of the women gave him faith. And his condition began to improve as if he had already become immortal, if not in the soul at least in his old, storm-tossed, weary body.

XXXIII

AT FIRST Lalu had waited day after day for the final release to take place. He went about the village with a dumb fear in his heart that his father might die while he was out.

And he felt very uneasy in his conscience about the queer feeling of disgust he experienced at sight of the sick old man. He tried to think of his father as the powerful, brave man he had been—his hard jaws, his sharp eyes, and

his quick and wonderful mouth which could express all the shades of anger, scorn, derision and holiness.

He recalled the extraordinary skill of his father's hands; their mastery over a hundred different sides of manual labour on the farm. Tying clay pots to the chain on the well, feeding the cattle, hoeing and ploughing, scattering the seed, cutting the crop with a deft neatness, building a haystack in his own wonderful way, mowing and threshing and marketing the stock—all this old Nihalu had done with amazing efficiency, in spite of his advancing years.

And the way he could talk; his deep voice rolling up and down with a passion that made every word of contempt he used stick for ever. Those who courted his wrath were terrified of his growlings.

Lalu could never forget the merciless virulence with which the old man had stood up to Harbans Singh when the landlord had come with the policia to arrest him. And yet he recalled, too, old Nihalu's kindness to the children who caught him by the legs with shouts of welcome. Yet there was a stubbornness about him, a hard, relentless, unbending mulishness which was so difficult to contend with.

It seemed that his father would linger on in a kind of life in death, like a weight, a responsibility to others in his helplessness, an ugly, old cumbersome relic of the past. And so Lalu was easy enough in his conscience towards the end of his ten days' leave as he prepared to return to the regiment.

He saw himself again his own master, regimental duties completed, thinking his own thoughts as he lay in his bed in the barracks.

This urge to go back to the army as soon as his leave was up received a certain panicky impetus from some vague and alarming rumours that were current in the village.

'Oh, God, oh, God, I see the end of the world, the coming of the reign of darkness,' his father had whispered in the struggle of his life against death. And Gujri, who had heard this premonition, had gone to old Pandit Balkrishna and asked him whether Nihalu's prognostications were well

founded in the spiritual sphere of the stars.

The old priest wagged the great round beard on his full face, refulgent and red like the sun's visage with the plentiful food of temple offerings and danced away in glee—his pot belly rumbling on his short, stocky legs—towards a corner of the embellished shrine of Rama and Sita to fetch a ring.

Looking at the top of this ring where a glass was embedded instead of a stone, he gave it to Gujri and asked her to describe what she saw through it.

And Gujri detailed what she thought she saw.

'At first there is light. Now the scene has changed. It is a field with a Jat, holding a sword, standing in the middle.'

'Shake the ring,' the priest said.

And the awestruck Gujri obediently stirred the ring and peered into the glass again. But this time she couldn't see anything, only darkness, darkness everywhere.

'The Kaliyug has come, mother,' the priest said, taking the ring away from Gujri's hand. 'Youth will not respect age any more. Brother will not come to the aid of brother, and men will fight with swords in their hands. And there will be a great flood of the fire arising from Vilayat, which will sweep over the whole world. Machines will destroy man everywhere. But if you want to save your husband, you may offer a feast to the gods on the next anniversary of your ancestor's death.'

Gujri and the other worshippers who were near the shrine were frightened by the portents and went and told the words of the prophecy to their relations, with such exaggerations as messages acquire from the salt of the tongue. These awestruck listeners in their turn added their saliva to the oracle when they told the folk in the bazaar what Balkrishna had said in temple. And the shopkeepers and the idle peasants who sat dilatorily killing flies about the village let their brooding imaginations work up the news into a wild, stirring rumour.

Lalu scoffed at this talk, till Gughi came, sweating and black like a reed burnt to cinders by the sun, and said that

his father who had taken fares had come back with some weird news, which of course had reached the worthy priest a couple of days previously, that a war had started because some Prince near Vilayat had been murdered by a man. The tongue of gossip in the village had not been so ridiculous as Lalu had thought.

XXXIV

LALU packed up his kit on the afternoon of the day when his leave expired and, waving aside the entreaties and protests of his mother, got ready to take the train in the evening.

His mother, cried with heart-rending sobs, but the old man sat up with a violent thrust of his head and, contrary to the spirit of all his embittered outpourings against the ferungis, said, 'Oh stop and cease to mourn, weak woman. Cease to mourn for me or for him. Parents breed children not for themselves but to fight public causes. Let him go out to life and be a lion's son. Let him go out and perform deeds worthy of his forefathers. Let him go out and reap the harvests of experience.'

Gujri wept the more bitterly, Kesari joining her, and Dayal Singh begged Lalu to write for an extension of leave to the Sarkar.

But the old man said, 'These women, they can only bleat and weep like goats.' And he shouted and bawled and worked himself up like a sick lion on the threshold of his cave who refuses even when mortally hurt to abdicate. And with wild whispers on his blue lips which seemed envenomed as if by the poisonous kiss of death, he succumbed to a delirium, so that his eyes bulged out of his head and his body writhed with a pain which seemed as if it would be his death.

But as soon as they tried to bring him down to earth, he rose and, stiffening his neck querulously, abused his sons for hastening to lower him, shouted at his wife for crying and beating her breasts in anticipation of his demise

and the boy's departure, and declared that they were all his enemies, waiting for him to expire, to breathe his last.

Lalu touched the old man's feet and, burdened by the weight of an inexpressible tenderness, he sought to quieten his father, saying. 'True words, Bapu, true words. There is no talk of anything. Don't be angry. Don't excite yourself.'

To old man spread his arms towards his son and, patting him on the shoulder, admonished him, 'Be brave, son. Take courage and don't be a jackal. Go and work with your hands, and be happy, for you are young. And leave me to die if I have to die. Fight your enemies and the enemies of Truth and keep alive the name of your ancestors. Never let it be said of our family that we were cowards in the face of death.'

Thus he lingered, broken and enfeebled and conscious of the world which had outlived him, yet stubborn in his resistance to death, his hard will unrelaxed, his faith in the beliefs he had inherited from his past unyielding, pathetically worn, as he tried to defened his loneliness against the life that surrounded him.

When the moment came to leave, Lalu stood oppressed, overwrought, and strained by a heart full of gratitude to every one of the men, women and children who came fussing round him, loading him with gifts of sweets and fruits and flowers and kind words. The sweat poured down his body and his head was dizzy with the fierce, burning flame of a wild unrest within him.

Gughi and Ghulam and Churanji and even those boys of the village who before had been prevented by their parents from talking to him or playing with him, swarmed in and around the barn, quarrelling for the privilege of carrying his belongings. And after touching his father's feet for the last time with a murmur of 'Sat Sri Akal,' and embracing his howling mother he started off. Gurji could not bear to leave him and shrieked and cried and was inconsolable. And there was a clamouring among the women of the village who were straining the meagre incomes of their husbands and forcing sweets on Lalu and the ceremonial rupee which well-

wishers give to those who are going long journeys.

Waves of a deep humility and shame swirled through his body at these gestures of goodwill. And so, when all the innumerable auspicious rites had been performed by his mother, from the consecrating of his forehead with sacred marigolds and the distribution of sweets, to the fetching of a sweeper to meet him at the door, he actually set out.

Almost the whole of the village followed him in a procession to see him off to the cross-roads beyond the caravanserai. It was an imposing procession, marshalled under the tutelage of Kalu, the black dog, who ran along in little capers at the side and occasionally rushed ahead sniffin the trail of some imagined prey and then tearing back to bark a ferocious farewell.

Lalu could have cried with an overflow of tenderness, so touched was he with the magnanimity of their love; even though he knew that it had come from the mainsprings of a convention which had ritualized departure; even though he sensed the element of vanity that was in the attempts of his relatives to outdo one another in generosity and nobleness now towards him whom they had once made a scapegoat.

He kept his hands joined and bowed and whispered, 'Sat Sir Akal', 'I fall at your feet', and 'Salaam Mian', at every step—to each man or woman he passed in the lanes and alleys as he advanced—according to the religion of the person he addressed, till all the hardness of his nature seemed to have melted into a fixed smile of kindliness and made every breath on his lips a sigh.

At the cross-roads near the caravanserai, where Gughi's father stood with his yekka specially harnessed to the horse to transport him to the station, he begged his relations not to trouble to come any farther, for they were all for trudging to the station behind him. After a great deal of insistence, they took leave of him with embraces; his mother, Kesari and Dayal Singh weeping and casting benedictions and prayers and counsels upon him.

The ache of embarrassment of all this love, together with the lack of time, made Lalu rush up to the yekka after the

briefest handshakes with his friends. 'We will meet soon,' he said.

The rolling fields of sugar-cane burnt brown and gold and ripe red by the summer sun flashed past his eyes, rustling here with a slight breeze that touched their stalks, billowing there where the wind swept their heads, and exuding the rich scent of that warmth which comes from the moist earth mingling with the air and the water.

He felt as if he would break down with the sadness of leaving this land. But though the liquid welled up in his eyes and there was the taste of salt on his tongue, he could not weep, and merely sat listening to the rattling wheels of the carriage speeding along through the rich hot shade after sunset.

'Come, son, you go and buy the tikkus, and I will carry your luggage,' said Jhandu, who sat in front, grave and still and self-contained, shaking the reins of his mare easily.

'No, Uncle, I will carry it,' protested Lalu.

'No, son, you get along and buy the tikkus,' Jhandu said, jumping down as if he was a boy of fourteen like his son Gughi. And catching hold of Lalu's kit he said, 'Come, son, don't be sad. Think of the time when you used to be the strongest and most courageous lad in the village. And feel happy that you are the only one of them who has gone out to the world. Think of the day when you will come back here like a hero.'

The sharp whistle of the 7·30 train shrieked as if it were calling all the tardy passengers who were hurrying from different villages to catch it. Lalu strode along into the booking-hall of the station with a deliberate manner, suppressing the dim hopes, the stray thoughts and the torn emotions which bubbled in him in frenzied turbulence.

XXXV

'JANG! Jang! Larai! Jang chir gaya! (War has begun.) Jang! Jang! Larai!'

The shouts came from the sunburnt earth outside the

cantonment station, above the call of the coolies offering themselves for hire, as the train which Lalu had taken at Manabad steamed into the morning.

'Jang! Jang!' he heard, and stared out of a window of the third-class carriage crammed with a sleeping, waking, coughing, spitting, praying, cursing humanity, and opened his eyes to the miracle, as if he were going to devour the light.

'Judg! Jang! Larai!' he heard and scrambled out of the compartment, stumbling over trunks and boxes and legs and hookahs and uncouth bundles of grain and cooked food, bedsteads and linen of all kinds.

The broad glare of the blue heavens strained his eyes, as he stretched his limbs, feeling turbid and heavy after the fitful sleep of the night. He contemplated the blue-uniformed coolies and white-uniformed guards and stationmasters, their green and red signalling flags swaying in their hands as they moved about, grim and sullen, against the little red-brick building of the station which seemed to flame up into the sky. He had slept on a top bunk all night and he looked at the world with the eyes of a blind man gaining sight.

'Jang! Jang!' he heard, and stared out of a window of the ing in his voucher, the words seemed to have spread over the whole length of the irregular railway bazaar like wild fire. In dirty cookshops and outside open air barbers' stalls, by fruit-shops and at the feet of the sweetmeat sellers' rows of sugared condiments covered by flies, little groups of men still gathered, sombre and tense like thunderclouds, waiting for an electric spark.

He walked down the highway which led to the barracks across the bazaar, and asked a sugar-cane seller, who was sharpening his knife, what the excitement was about. But the man was surly, and did not speak.

Lalu went ahead eagerly, since he wanted to get to the barracks and know the worst. As he hurried along, he noticed the difference between the quick, rigid, formal atmosphere of the cantonment in which he was walking, and the stillness of the evening in Nandpur which had seemed to

be crying over the darkening trees, and sighing over the bedraggled old village, faded with the pain of centuries, which leaned upon the brown earth in thick layers of static heat.

Once on the open highway, he saw groups of soldiers in mufti, talking in subdued murmurs as they marched to go on railway duty. Lal Singh knew they must be making for the station from which he had alighted and he could not disturb their march by running up to them. But had a war really started, and would his regiment be called up? Would they send him back on more leave? He didn't want to return, somehow. He would feel silly if he went back after having left so hurriedly. But he was a sepoy with only four or five months' training to his credit. There could be no question of his being drafted away anywhere.

'Jang! Jang!' The words quarrelled in the mouths of a crowd of people at the cross-roads beyond him, and he quickened his steps.

'Jang! Jang! Jang has broken out!' The men surged towards someone who they thought might know a little more than they did.

'Jang! Jang!' they mumbled and fell away, rolling their eyes and twisting their lips and shaking their heads with misgiving and doubts.

They were men of all races, all religions, castes and creeds; Hindus of the four kinds, Muhammadans of the seventy-two sects, Christians from the regimental bands, Sikhs. There were men high and low, merchantmen in muslin and uncouth coolies in homespuns and straw. And they were all astir, all agitated.

'Jang! Jang!' The words fell on their ears and that was all that mattered. 'War has broken out!' they shouted and murmured.

'Jang! Jang!' Soft rumour had emanated somewhere! 'Jang! Jang!' Soft rumour had become current somehow! 'Jang! Jang!' Soft rumour had spread itself throughout the length and breadth of the land with the swiftness and the force of a cyclone.

Everyone seemed to have heard it. Everyone was deeply

concerned about it. 'Jang! Jang!' Every man hoped, feared and wondered as at the prospect of a vast sacrifice before the Goddees kali.

Lalu would have craned his neck to l ook, and would have asked, but having heard nothing more than the word jang, he knew there was no more to be known except through army orders in the barracks, and hurried on.

Of all the places in his experience, he had found the cantonment the most solid and impregnable against sound. It was a well-known thing that the Sahibs didn't like anyone to talk except in a whisper, and the civilians as well as the soldiers were forbidden to make the slightest noise outside the bungalows on pain of being looked up in the quarter guard. But today all those quiet retreats of the white Sahibs, nestling in beautiful garden bowers behind shady trees and tall, well-trimmed hedges, seemed excited.

From the tall spires and lofty minarets of the enormous Girja Ghar, always majestically silent and peaceful, the bell tolled today as if the church had caught fire. The Goddess of War had usurped the palace where Lalu had seen the God of Peace nailed to the cross, a tongue bulging from his hollow mouth and a crown of thorns on his head.

The remote, detached, bronzed, white-moustached colonels, and the boyish-looking, newly-appointed subalterns, stepped with their right foot and their left foot quicker than ever, nodding to the salutes of the passing sepoys, without staring hard in their usual manner. The middle-aged captains and grumpy-looking majors cycled about as if suddenly inspired with extraordinary activity. They all ran in and out of their bungalows in a breathless hurry; though they still looked calm, composed and undisturbed, with that vacant expression which Lalu had only seen on the faces of Englisemen.

Even the ordinarily silent Club maidan, where the army officers played polo, was ablaze with excitement, as the sepoy orderlies and Tommies passed with the stamping of their heavy ammunition boots, presumably on their way to deliver letters from the Chota Sahib to the Burra Sahib or from the Burra Sahib to the Chota Sahib.

One thing here, however, was its usual self. A group

of English children played, laughed, cried meaninglessly, thoughtlessly, blissfully, ignorantly. They did not seem to care. What was it to them, whether peace reigned or war broke out, so long as they could play with their wooden soldiers unhampered by the dictates of their ayahs? And today they seemed to have ample opportunities of doing so. For their ayahs looked inattentive and fluttered about, in neat white skirts and dupattas rustling with starch.

Lalu had always been fascinated by the English children, those beautiful, pink, doll-like creatures, dressed in pretty frocks. And he headed towards them, thinking that perhaps he could exchange a word or two with the little ones.

The ayahs, well-known for the superiority they affected as the intimate servants of Sahibs, and also rather affected in spite of their twisted black faces, because they were the only unattached women in a world of thousands of soldiers, ignored him as he came up shyly to stand near the group under a tree.

From what he could hear, the women were busy comparing notes with their friends, the bearers and the Khansamahs, about the conversations they had overheard at breakfast in the moring. The bearers looked flurried and unhappy. They would have to part from their beloveds, the ayahs, Lalu thought, as they would become unemployed if the Sahibs went to the war. 'And I suppose they like their life with the Sahibs,' he said to himself. And he could sense the glow of exhilaration they felt at being in contact with the wonderful, well-dressed, quick-moving, active, efficient foreigners, seemingly so superior in quality to the native oxen, except for the fact that they were said to clean their buttocks with paper.

He tried to talk to a little child who had strayed from its nurse.

'My Sahib say damn Jirman declare Jung, but Jirman die when Angrez log reach frond,' he heard one of the bearers say enthusiastically.

'My Sahib go frond at once!' another put in sentimentally, with that affection which is the peculiar gift of Indian servants when they are devoted to their masters.

'Jarnel Jackson Sahib come lunch with my Sahib. I do no shopping, I bhago,' a third announced his sudden and unceremonious departure.

The others lingered for a while, and there were tense whispers and then long-drawn strains of melancholy farewells, as the group began to break up : 'Acha, if we live we will meet again, by the grace of God.'

Left alone, the ayahs lapsed into a pathetic silence. They called their wards and began to read their fortunes on their palms, or drew lines on the earth to tell their fates by some mystical calculations, and one looked soulfully into the blue eyes of the little boy who was in her charge, as if the innocent creature were already an orphan.

Lalu walked away, afraid to stay near the women lest his presence there be misinterpreted by a passing officer. But hardly had he crossed the road to take a track near the cantonment bazaar which led through the vast expanse of bush-infested, cactus-strewn wasteland to the barracks, when he heard a drum burst forth on the outskirts of the Sadar Bazaar, which stood on the borders of the cantonment—a drum and the loud voice of a crier, followed by a crowd of men, women and children :

'The country belongs to the King-Emperor. The orders are of the Angrezi Sarkar. A Jang has started. A Jang between fiendish Girmany and the Angrezi Sarkar!'

The vague rumour of the day before had now become news to Lalu.

The crier struck the drum again, dhum, dhum, dhum, and roared forth his clarion call. And a bigger crowd collected around him, solemn-faced and intent.

Lalu stood stunned, though this was only a confirmation of what he had heard. But he would not move away. He stood anxiously waiting for something to happen.

Silence, utter silence, prevailed for a moment, silence waiting like a stagnant pool for some mischievous boy's little pebble to stir it into motion. A chance word was needed to release the pent-up tension.

It came.

For suddenly the sea of sunny silence overflowed its

banks. A voice arose—a voice other than the crier's, an unmistakable voice, the voice of no less a person than Havildar Lehna Singh himself.

'Bharti-ho! Enlist! Sons of tigresses, scions of noble warr ors. Bharti-ho!'

It was like the bursting of heavens. It was like the thundering of angry clouds. It was like a terrific flash of lightning!

'Bharti-ho!'

The voice of the multi-tongued crowd repeated the note wildly like a mob crying for vengeance.

'Bharti-ho! Bharti-ho!'

It was followed by other shouts full of enthusiasm, unmistakably Lehna Singh's.

'Join the army! Come to war! Come and see the wonder lands across the black waters!'

'Join the army! Come to war!' the multi-tongued crowd repeated the slogan.

Seeing that the mob was behind him with one accord, Havildar Lehna Singh began to walk forward with the crier, who beat the drum as if it were a march-past before some dignitary, a commander-in-chief or a monarch.

The teeming crowd had decided to fight and lay down their lives for their King-Emperor, and shouts of praise for the sons of tigresses rang to the sky till they were broken again by the dhum-dhum of the crier's drum.

Lal Singh had felt like laughing at the Havidar's heroics, but he saw the crowd advance in a military march and was cowed against his will by the reality of the passion that had been worked up. He felt lucky that he was already a privileged member of the army and these people were not. He turned on his feet and rushed towards the barracks. His heart was thumping and he burned to get there, to be in the seething cauldron of things, for life seemed a wild adventure.

XXXVI

IF LIFE seemed an adventure to Lal Singh, it was a set scheme to Lance Naik Lok Nath.

'I have come back,' the boy said, going up to report to Lok Nath when the latter came into the barracks with the company after parade.

'Oh, you have, have you?' the Lance Naik said, twisting his face as he ground his lower jaw against his upper one, while he mechanically undid the puttees on his shins. He flung the discarded puttees on his bed, turned abruptly, and burst out, 'Shun! Salute!'

Lal Singh shuffled his feet to attention and saluted in a manner which betrayed that he had lost some of the efficiency of the army during the few days he had been at home.

'Your left hand straight down and your right hand raised briskly to the forehead!' said the corporal in a deliberate tone, 'You have forgotten all that you learned here, swine!'

The babbling of the sepoys in the barracks died down as Lok Nath's hard voice shot through the length of the hall.

Lal Singh shook with fear as he tried to execute the corporal's orders more efficiently.

'That's right,' Lok Nath said. 'Now, tell me what you have to say.'

'I have come back,' Lal Singh repeated.

'Come back, come back—but who are you talking to?' Lok Nath bawled with a sneer. 'I am Havildar Sahib to you!'

'I have come back, Lance Naik Lok Nath,' Lal Singh said, stung by the officer's reproach, and mouthing only the bare official title.

'Shap.' Lok Nath rose and slapped Lal Singh on the face, roaring : 'Everyone calls me Havildar, insolent swine.'

'But you are not a Havildar, you are Lance Naik,' replied Lalu, relaxing from his stiff rigidity and burning with anger.

'You insolent swine! You will pay for this! You have insulted a superior officer! Scum! They go back on leave, these puppies, and forget all the discipline I try to knock into them! Especially on the eve of such grave happenings.' Lok Nath blustered on in a tone which was half-aggressive and half-apologetic, as if he sought to enlist the sympathies of the sepoys.

'I did my duty and came to report to you,' Lal Singh said.

'You are a day late!' Lok Nath replied, after a slight pause, changing his tactics. 'You should have been here last night. And not only that. You were absent from parade this morning.'

'I thought my leave had expired yesterday, and that I needn't get here till today,' said Lal Singh lamely, his voice halting. For he suddenly realized that Lok Nath was turning the tables on him with a legitimate complaint.

'I suppose you buried yourself in your mother's,' said the corporal, grinding the words between tightly gritted teeth.

'Hold your tongue, Lok Nath, don't mention my mother like that! protested Lal Singh, throwing all discretion to the winds as his blood boiled at the crude insult.

'Lok Nath again!' shouted the corporal, and taking Lal Singh unawares, he struck the boy again, 'I am an officer.'

'You can't insult me like that,' Lal Singh said, red-hot with rage, and clutching wildly at the wall, in an effort to save himself from tottering into a heap.

'Oh, leave him, Havildara,' Uncle Kirpu said, as he came up.

'No, never, no!' Lok Nath cried. 'I'll see to this. He had no right to insult a superior officer. And I will present him for arriving late from leave, and for absence from parade this morning.' And he hurriedly untied his boots, slipped his sweating feet into a pair of Indian shoes, secured his belt and pushed Lalu forward to the door, shouting, 'Come, you upstart! Come, illegally begotten!'

Lalu lurched heavily forward, his face pale, his big-

boned body shaking and his heart drumming aloud like the crier's drum in the morning. His eyes were covered by the fumes of an inexpressible fury, so that he felt blind and helpless.

'Hurry up and try to be a man,' shouted Lok Nath, pushing him out of the door with both hands with a spiteful thrust, so that the boy slid into the verandah and, losing his balance, fell chin downwards into the courtyard, his turban loose, his hand slipping on some tea-leaves and his mouth despattered with dust.

'Oh, what is the matter? Who is quarrelling in the barracks! Swine!' shouted Subedar Major Arbel Singh, the cunning, thin little head of the regiment, who stood talking to Havildar Lachman Singh outside his quarters, while his son, Subah Singh, a tall fair-complexioned boy, stood with bent head beside them.

Lok Nath walked up to the group of officers, kicked his heels and saluted, and addressing himself to the Subedar Major said, 'Sepoy Lal Singh of B Company, 2 Platoon, came back late from leave, Subedar Major Sahib, and he insulted me when he came to report his arrival.'

'Call him here, the swine,' said the Subedar Major, casually turning his long wolf's face, whose mane was tied round his jaws with the finest of nets.

Lok Nath kicked his heels, saluted, turned his back and went towards the barrack to fetch Lal Singh.

'If I may say so, Subedar Major Sahib,' said Lachman Singh, with a smile on his kind, embarrassed face, 'Lok Nath is rather high-handed in his treatment of the men. The sepoys have been complaining for some time. Please forgive me for saying this, but perhaps he is unnecessarily stern. I have hesitated to report him. But since the boys dare not risk telling on a superior, I venture to bring it to your honour's notice.'

'He plays hockey for the regiment, Subedar Sahib,' said Subah boyishly.

'Authority and discipline must be preserved, you know, Lachman Singh,' said the Subedar Major, hardening his frame till he seemed wooden, ignoring his son and repeat-

ing one of the many sonorous phrases with which he was wont to treat problems that arose among the ranks. For, having obtained a direct viceroy's commission as a Jamedar through the influence of his father, who was a small landholder in the hills, he had risen through backbiting and shrewd guile to be the Indian head of the regiment, though he lacked even a knowledge of the alphabet. 'Authority and discipline and proper respect for superior officers,' he continued, as Lok Nath and Lal Singh came, kicked their heels and saluted.

'This is the man, Subedar Major Sahib,' said Lok Nath, hard and grim since he sensed that Havildar Lachman Singh had told upon him.

'What have you to say for yourself, ohe, boy?' the Subedar Major asked.

'Huzoor, Lance Naik Lok Nath abused me,' answered Lal Singh, 'when I went to report to him on my arrival from leave.'

'Huzoor, he insulted me first by not addressing me properly,' burst out Lok Nath.

'Is that so, ohe?' asked the Subedar Major.

'I erred, Subedar Major Sahib, at first,' said Lalu softly, quaking with fear, 'but then I addressed him properly. He has got a grudge against me ever since—'

'Ever since what?' the Subedar Major roared with impatience. 'Speak up.'

'Huzoor, Lance Naik Lok Nath reported him to the Company Commander, but Lieutenant Audley Sahib dismissed the charge,' said Lachman Singh.

'He has read up to the eighth class,' Subah ventured again, his red face pale, his eyes lowered to the earth as if he was in terror of his father, though he was the taller of the two.

'He is an upstart, Subedar Major Sahib, very self-opinionated and proud, and thinks himself superior to everyone just because he can read and write a little,' said Lok Nath, 'but orders are orders for him as for anyone else.'

'Is that true?' the Subedar Major asked.

'Your honour, he abused my mother,' said Lalu hesitantly.

'How did he abuse your mother? What exactly did he say?' queried the Subedar Major with a lascivious leer.

'It was a vulgar abuse, your honour...too vulgar for your ears,' said Lalu.

'Nothing is too vulgar for my ears,' said the Subedar, with unconscious humour. 'Come on,' he added eagerly, 'tell me exactly what he said.'

'He said . . . I had been hiding in my mother's . . . .' faltered Lal Singh.

'Your mother's?' insisted the Subedar. 'You couldn't go back even if you tried, you headstrong rascal.'

And his throat gurgled with laughter. 'You should learn to take such things for granted,' he continued. 'You are in the army now, and not still sucking your mother's teats, like a baby. You should learn to harden yourself.' And turning to his own son, he said, 'You too, ohe, son of a swine, you too make yourself strong if you are going to be a soldier.'

'Has Subah Singh joined up then, Huzoor?' asked Lok Nath, bursting with familiarity now that he felt that things were going in his favour.

'Han, I have just offered him as a recruit as my contribution to the Sarkar for the war,' said the Subedar Major, affecting a casual air. 'He will go to B Company, too, if he is accepted.'

'I shall make a man of him, sir, if he is coming to my company,' said Lok Nath.

'Yes, but henceforward you will have to be dealt with,' said the Subedar Major, damping the spirit of the corporal. 'You can go on breaking recruits in, but I shall stop your promotion. From tomorrow, Holdar Lachman Singh, transfer Lok Nath to Number 4 Platoon, and you take over 2 Platoon.'

'Huzoor, what is my fault, that I am being punished?' asked Lok Nath, his face pale, his eyes bloodshot. 'Surely it is that illegally begotten who ought to be punished.'

'That's all, Lance Naik Lok Nath!' snapped the Subedar

Major, who had his own reasons for wanting to stop Lok Nath's promotion. 'My orders' and then he turned to Lachman Singh, affecting an air of justice. 'This boy is not to be given any more leave if the regiment is ordered to the phrunt.'

'Subedar Major Sahib!' protested Lok Nath abjectly, and fell at the officer's feet.

'Keep quiet!' roared Subedar Major Arbel Singh, 'Shun! Salute! Left about turn!' And he shook with rage.

Lok Nath slunk away.

'Tell me, Holdara,' said the Subedar Major, turning to Lachman Singh, 'If I promise to get you promoted to the rank of Jamadar when we get to the phrunt, do you mind if I recommend my son for a direct commission.' But he realized that his son and Lalu were listening to the confidential talk.

'Go away, ohe, you two boys,' he said, turning to them.

'I have no objection, Subedar Sahib, but Lok Nath has had an eye on a commission till he even counselled the Company Commander that I should be asked to retire.'

'I will see to Lok Nath,' said Subedar Major. 'I shall stop his promotion and recommend orderly Kirpu to be Havildar in your place when you are promoted Jamadar.'

Lalu heard this as he retreated towards the barracks with Subah, whose friendship he had won through hockey practice long before he went away on leave. He trembled with fear, as he had been unnerved by his presentation to the Subedar Major. But also his heart glowed with relief at the way things had turned out for him. He didn't really want to go home on leave again and he felt he had secured a good riddance of Lok Nath at the cost of very little to himself. But he was sorry for Lachman Singh if the Havildar would really have to forego his chance of a commission.

'So you will be my officer soon,' he said to the boy.

'I don't know,' said Subah. 'All that I know for the moment is that my father does not mind spending money on my step-brother's education, but is enlisting me as a

recruit just because I have no mother.'

But Lalu was not interested in intrigues about promotion. He only repeated the proverb, "Never walk behind a horse or before an officer, for both will kick."

XXXVII

THE vague news and the alarming rumours of the first week of August gave rise to extraordinary speculations in the barracks of the Ferozepur cantonment.

Some said that the war beyond the black waters was only another Mahabharata because the Angrezi Badshah was a cousin of the Badshah of Girmany, just as the Pandus were cousins of the Kurus. The principles of light and darkness, right and wrong, were arrayed on opposite sides, fighting for supremacy, and all the powerful kingdoms within reach were drawn into the struggle as in the old days of the great war of Kurukshetra. Right, it was devoutly argued, would triumph in the end, especially as Sri Krishna as incarnated in the Indians would show his hand. For had not the Gita said : 'Whenever there is decay in righteousness and the exaltation of unrighteousness, then I myself come forth for the protection of the week, for the destruction of the evil-doers?' But the working of the hand of God would remain invisible and Sri Krishna, incarnated in the form of the sepoys, would sacrifice Himself, and the whole world would be devastated and the flower of manhood perish, because God Almighty had sent the Devil in the incarnation of the German king to test mankind. The sins of ancient India led to its civilization being effaced and to the coming of a degenerate society, and an unrighteous polity. A similar catastrophe was, it was whispered, threatened by the European war.

Some said that it would not only be another war like the Mahabharata, but the end of the world in blood and fire, the end of the Kaliyug, through which the world had become less spiritual and more materialistic, especially in Germany where knowledge had been used to exalt the brute

in man.

Others declared that the German Badshah was really an incarnation of Changez Khan, who, in alliance with the Sultan of Turkey, the incarnation of Tamerlane, had come to spread the religion of Islam in this world.

And others still held that the German Badshah was a friend of the Arya Samaj of which Lalla Lajpat Rai was the head, and that he had quarrelled with the Angrezi Badshah so that he would come and conquer Aryavarta, free India from slavery and spread the faith of the Vedas.

But on the 8th of August orders arrived for the Lahore Division, including the Ferozepur, Jullundhur and Sirhind Brigades, and its divisional troops and artillery units, and the Meerut Division, including the Dehra Dun, Garwhal and Bareilly Brigades, and its divisional troops and artillery units, to mobilize. The 68th Rifles was to go as part of the Ferozepur Brigade.

The speculations and prognostications of the people ceased in the face of this news and most of them went about silently.

'I have a wife and three sons and a daughter,' one muttered disgruntedly. 'And the only reason I joined up was to get a subsidiary income to enable my sons to inherit the land in tact. It was said that this paltan had been to Chin once, but I didn't think it would go out of the country again till I retired. I thought that our foj was kept to maintain the authority of the Sarkar here and on the frontier, so why should I go across the black waters?'

'Who will look after my portion of land at home?' another said. 'My brothers will seize this opportunity of dividing up the three acres among themselves. And, since there is really little likelihood of our coming back and my wife is a respectable woman in purdah, no one will be able to file a suit against them. I am done for. Alas for this wicked Sarkar and alas for its companions.'

'With my own hands I struck the axe at my own feet. I could have gone on pension a few months ago,' said Daddy Dhanoo, nibbling the stem of his coconut hookah. 'Now I wonder if they will disqualify old men like me. But

the Sarkar knows best. Alas for money which makes us sell ourselves.'

'He calls himself an ancient after fifteen years' service,' said Kirpu. 'What about me with my eighteen years? The ox which obeys calls and scoldings and stands when bidden is better than the man who whines. But what has happened? Why are we going to fight and die in foreign lands? Why are they quarrelling among themselves? I haven't sold my soul to anyone because I ate the salt of the Sahibs.'

'It is the orders of the Sarkar,' said Dhanoo.

'A soldier's first duty is to obey,' Kirpu said ironically. 'Discipline, my friend, as Lok Nath would say. A soldier is sent to Chin, to Madras or to Quetta and he has to go whether he likes it or not. He has no other right but to obey. And he must fight to earn Subedar Major Arbel Singh the title of Captain and a grant of land, and to provide the Sahibs with nice Chinese girls. As for me, I have had so much experience of cooking for the Subedar Major's household, I think they will make me the chief of the regiment.'

'Don't you mind his fool, Daddy Dhanoo,' consolep Lalu. 'You wait till the medical examination.'

'Tell me, son, you are learned, what is it all about?' Dhanoo asked.

'All that I know,' said Lalu, 'is that a war has started between "fiendish Germany and the Angrezi Sarkar", as the towncrier called it. And all of us are going. Even I am going with only five months' training. And, of course, you, Daddy, have been on the frontier and seen the real thing. So they will want to utilize your experience. . . . The whole think is about who should have more money England or Germany.'

'Come along then, my brothers, come along, don't sit about,' said Havildar Lachman Singh, walking down the verandah. 'Men are tested which set to work. Come for the inspection parade at the hospital.'

'Look at him,' said Kirpu impudently. 'It seems men *are* tested when set to work.'

And for a while they sat discussing the possibilities of

getting out of it, even as they fanned the perspiration on their faces and in their armpits which welled profusely as the sky outside the barracks was overcast with layer upon layer of summer heat. They wondered whether a bribe to the Head Clerk would get them exemption, or perhaps one to the Doctor Sahib at the hospital. The frequency with which men were issuing out of the barracks, jugs in hand, towards the public latrines, indicated that the best plan was to buy a potion from the indigenous druggist in the cantonment bazaar in order to get dysentery. But there had been two sudden deaths in the Punjabi Mussulman Company, and drugs were dangerous. There was something to be said for desertion, except that the arm of the law stretched very far, unless you got away to Tibet or Ladakh.

Lalu didn't expect any leave of absence, and, after the inspection parade at the hospital, when he was passed fit for service and vaccinated in the stifling atmosphere of the dispensary, where the mixed smell of iodine and quinine almost made him swoon, he come back gasping to the barracks and sat feverishly devouring the pages of the *Fauji Akhbar* which he had borrowed from Havildar Lachman Singh.

There were several poems in the ordinarily prosaic paper. He read one, translated from the English into Urdu, which was dedicated to the Maharaja of Mysore :

'The haughty Germans dared to say,
"When with our forces we attack
This mighty England, on that day,
India will stab her in the back."
But you speak with another tongue.
Your peasants, soldiers, chiefs and lords
Cry, "Emperor of domains far flung,
Accept our swords, our faithful swords." '

Lalu didn't know that Germany had thought that India would stab England in the back. He had heard of agitators against the rule of the Angrezi Sarkar, people like Lalla Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who were said to have admonished the peasants in that song which was current in the Punjab:

"Take care of your turban, Oh, Jata!"

But he did not know of any other seditionists against the Sarkar. He had heard of the attempt on the life of Lord Harding by some Bengalis who had thrown bombs at the Viceregal carriage after the Delhi Durbar. But that was a few years ago when he was still at school. He had not heard of any of the enemies of the Sarkar since. At least he couldn't remember much more in the swimming stupor that spread over his limbs as the injected serum worked its way into his blood, and the blistering heat stung his flesh.

There was another poem he glanced at, by a distinguished Indian judge :

'O England! as we see thy need.' But he passed on from the unctuous eulogies of that to another by Mr. M. Bhattacharya, B.A., B.T.

But Lalu's arm was swollen now, swollen where it was vaccinated, and, apart from the sheer agony of contact with hot nothingness, he felt sleepy in the sultry, thunderous afternoon. And yet he wanted to read on, as he rolled about languidly and listlessly, to see if there was any more exciting news in the paper, his eyes rolling over the badly printed surface without concentrating on a whole column. His soul allied itself with the drama of destruction. strangely enough he felt murderous.

"In the frantic pursuit of a wild ambition confident in his over-accumulated resources and in grossly miscalculated probabilities in the international situation, recognizing no law but that of brute force—unrelenting, uncompromizing—this megacephalous incarnation of "Kultur" has plunged Europe into the greatest war of all times. . . ."

But it was all in the same vaunting strain, giving no real information. He went back to the second page and read the headlines of the speech of Sir Afzal Abdul Q'azi at Bombay.

' . . . at this juncture of supreme gravity, we have met together here today in this public hall, of different races and religions, of different creeds and communities—English and Hindu, Parsi and Mussulman—to proclaim with one heart, one soul and one mind that these differences distinguish but

do not divide us, and in the presence of this solemn situation we are merged in one general and universal denomination, the proud denomination of loyal and devoted subjects of the British crown (loud and prolonged cheers).'

He applied his eyes to other speeches, by Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, Sir Ibrahim Rahimtulla, Kt., C.I.E., Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Mr. Nazar-ul Haq, and other grand and high-sounding names. But the congestion of the serum in his blood was soporific. Not even the long accounts of the how and why of the war interested him now. Only adventure.

He threw the paper aside and lent himself to the pressure of the tense, airless heaviness and the lids closed on his eyes involuntarily.

XXXVIII

THE mobilization was carried through with supreme efficiency. There was a short leave of absence for most men and constant fatigues for the few unfortunates who had committed 'crimes' or were to remain in the depot.

The only topic of conversation for some time had been the exact date of departure of the regiment and the destination of the Divisions. But the sepoys had been left completely in the dark on both these counts and the range of conjecture had become limitless.

Lalu, who had been on 'quarter-guard duty' for a week, sitting on a bedstead in the red-brick verandah of the guradroom for hours, fully-dressed and accoutred, with intervals of sentry-go in the burning sun, had been excited by many a false alarm. As soon as a British or an Indian officer had come to the guard-room to see the Quarter-Master Havildar for his kit, and the N.C.O. in charge had turned out the guard to present arms, Lalu had thought that the officer had brought some news and was going to announce it. And every time the sepoy on sentry-go had challenged a stray civilian, he had felt the approach of impending disaster. And when he himself had been on sentry-go,

walking up and down his beat, he had been unable to keep his eyes straight. His attention had drifted from the busy scene at the armourer's shop near the guard-room, where crowds of sepoys waited to get their muskets repaired and cleaned, to the shimmering sunshine in the void, where he counted the hours so that he could get back to his bed and listen to the other sepoys.

Lance Naik Deva Singh, attached to the Quarter-Master's stores, who preened himself on being a high official and who had been thought too valuable for the depot to be called up for active service, had bragged, on the strength of reliable information from sources inaccessible to the rank and file, that the regiment was leaving soon for a destination which he said had not been disclosed for very important confidential reasons.

Sepoy Din Dayal, brother-in-law of Jamedar Suchet Singh, who had also been retained at the depot for some reason, said the regiment would go in a month to Egypt.

Recruit Subah Singh, the son of the Subedar Major Sahib Bahadur, who had been recommended for a direct commission, and who could derive fresh, first-hand information from the very source of all regimental orders, had said that the regiment was to join the thousands of men in a division composed of the armies of men, camels, elephants and big guns, contributed by all the famous Maharajas, and commanded by Maharaja Sir Pratap Singh, who, he said, was a friend of his father, the Subedar Major Sahib, loyal servant of the British Raj.

Uncle Kirpu recalled Hong Kong and talked of all the cities the regiment had passed on its way, especially Singapur where he said were many angrezi ships. And he had speculated that it was probable the army was bound for that region, since Germany would strategically want to attack the angrezi foj in the rear.

Daddy Dhanoo had ventured that it would probably come to a year in the wastes of the frontier and that he hoped it would turn out that way, because there at least one would be near home. It would be a pity for him to go

and die on angrezi soil, because from the grandiose funeral of General Cook Sahib, it had seemed to him that death among the English was an expensive affair. Besides it would mean a spoliation of his religion to be buried and not cremated according to Hindu rites. But the Sarkar knew best.

Lalu had prowled around the room of Havildar Lachman Singh to see if he could lay hands on any newspapers or company orders, but there had only been old numbers of the *Fauj Akhbar* littered about the room as the Havildar had been packing up. Seeing the puzzled questioning look in his eyes, Lachman had said, 'Don't be anxious, son, the orders will come any day this week.'

And orders had indeed come that very day. The Lahore Division was to embark at Karachi on the 24th of August. The Ferozepur Brigade was to leave for Karachi on the 23rd.

It wasn't yet known where they were going from Karachi : to Chin, to Egypt or to Germany. But accompanying this news had come more rich rumours, which occupied the sepoys while they packed and attended to a hundred different things—from conveying kit-bags to one end of the barracks to going with loaded mule carts to the station. It was said, for instance, that the Maharajas of various states were showing their loyalty to the Badshah of Vilayat by donating lakhs of rupees to provide a wonder hospital-ship called *The Loyalty* ; that one Maharaja had, indeed, offered not only his troops but his treasury and his personal jewellery to the Angrezi Badshah. And apart from all the princes, noblemen, landholders, sahukars, retired officers and lawyers, even the Lama, who never dies, had offered a thousand Tibetan soldiers to the Sarkar and was fasting and praying day and night for the success of the angrezi race.

On the afternoon of the 24th, however, after all the harassing major and minor arrangements had been made, the sepoys walked down by ones and twos and threes to the dusty main road by the barracks to line up for the march to the station.

Lalu felt too casual and ordinary for the occasion as he accompanied Uncle Kirpu and Daddy Dhanoo down towards the road in the cruel, cracking heat. He could see the musketry range with the black ball on the white screen of the targets. His heart had nearly stopped the first time he had found himself shooting with live bullets, but he had liked it afterwards. Only it was going to be much more real and the jokes of a neighbour or the antics of the washerman's donkey on the skyline wouldn't be so amusing.

He looked at Kirpu, who had just shaded his eyes with his right hand as if he were exploring something in the distance, and then he glanced at Dhanoo who was sweating with the heat and already out of breath from being loaded with his kit. Suddenly Kirpu shouted 'ohe, Baloo, ohe, Baloo' and ran towards the family lines by the regimental bazaar, where some children were playing as usual under the shade of a pipal-tree, calling again, 'ohe, Baloo, ohe, Baloo.'

But Baloo, the bania's son, whom Lalu had rescued from the assaults of Lok Nath and the sepoys in the barracks some months ago, was now too frightened of a uniform and fled with the other children behind the sackcloth curtains of the family lines. And Kirpu stopped running after them, smiled embarrassedly and said to his companions as they came up, 'I thought I would give the little fool a paisa to spend.'

Lalu looked at Uncle Kirpu's face for a moment and then withdrew his gaze, for tears were in the man's eyes.

As they crossed the two hundred yards of waste ground by the followers' line to the main road, they saw that most of the sepoys stood about with their companies under the scanty shade of kikar-trees, some embracing the friends who were to remain in the depot, others arranging their packs and belts where the leather was too tight, their brown faces smouldering with the heat, the tension and the excitement after the walk from the barracks in the glare of the ferocious Ferozepur sun.

Lalu and Kirpu and Dhanoo came up wiping the sweat

from their faces, almost dazed by the sunshine, and stood for a while among the sweepers and washermen and shopkeepers and the sepoys from the depot who had come to see the regiment off.

'Do write,' a sikh sepoy was saying to another who looked like his elder brother. 'While you were here "one and one made eleven", now I shall be alone.'

'There is no talk, Chanan Singha,' said the elder brother, 'we will meet soon,' but even in spite of himself, his big, broad, handsome, bearded face was averted, with tears on his cheeks.

'Havildar,' said a washerman's boy, running up to Lachman Singh, who was engaged in checking up some register with Babu Khushi Ram, who was dressed in uniform with Lance Naik's two stripes on his arm, since he was going with the regiment, 'will you bring me an angrezi watch from Vilayat?'

' "The camel went in search of horns and lost his ears",' commented Khushi Ram, more perky than ever in his new apparel.

Havildar Lachman Singh smiled and patted the boy on the head affectionately, saying, nevertheless, 'Acha, son, you will all have sweets when we come back.'

'Only one mouth in lakhs can talk sugar,' said the head sweeper's wife, who was the only female who had come to see the regiment off, though the others in purdah looked on through small apertures in their hooded aprons from a distance.

'Ohe, Lalu, here I am,' called Subah Singh, the Subedar Major's son, impetuously. 'Our company is there. I am in your platoon.'

There was a commotion ahead of the regiment as the Karnel Sahib and some officers cantered up from the mess on horseback, and all eyes turned in awe towards the white men and the private conversation stopped.

Then orders rang out : 'Fallin! Fallin!' And there was a noise of hurried words and clattering feet and a chorus of sighs in the dense atmosphere.

The platoons formed into companies, and N.C.O.'s and

Indian officers took their positions ; the company commanders coming quietly from where they had stood in a bunch at a respectful distance from the rank and file.

More orders and there was a grim silence, except for the rustling of forms and the whispers of the sightseers.

The band struck up and the Colonel at the head of the regiment adjusted a loud-speaker to his mouth and shouted something in Hindustani, ending w th the word 'March'. The ranks didn't understand him, and looked askance for a moment. But the columns had already begun to move up and they started.

'Bole so Nihal! Sat Sri Akal!' the cry of a chosen man at the head of the Sikh company rang out. Behind it came the chorus and the noise of measured footsteps, lef-right, lef-right.

'Bolo Sri Ram Chander ki jai!' someone at the head of the Dogra Company shouted. And the sepoys, looking at each other with embarrassed smiles on their set faces, shouted the call in unison, and even followed up the first cry with 'Kali Mai ki jai!' And behind it came the noise of measured footsteps, lef-right, lef-right.

'Allah ho Akbar!' called a priest at the head of the Mussulman companies.

Lalu felt affected by the cries without being moved. For all the prayers to the gods, Fate was not in the hands of the Almighty but in the hands of the Sarkar. His heart beat pit-a-pat with the curious exaltation of joy to find himself actually on the way to Vilayat as well as the fear that he might die fighting in the war to which they were all going. And he felt a motion in his belly. He was sorry he hadn't been to the latrines before walking away from the barracks. But the band struck up and drowned the joy and the fear, as well as the urge for excretion in the entrails.

XXXIX

THE machinery of the Sarkar seemed to work with a

wonderful perfection. For the whole of the Ferozepur Brigade found itself resting in various trains by the sidings on Karachi harbour station the morning after it had left the cantonment. And trains loaded with other brigades were arriving almost every half-hour.

A working-party of fifty men had been sent out from each regiment to load the heavy kit, machine-guns, machine-gun mules and officers' horses, and the regiments were marching up as units at short intervals. The Connaught Rangers and the 129th Baluchis had already gone and the 68th Rifles were to follow next.

Lalu had slept through the journey, overcome with the fatigue of days of activity, dozing in a half-sleep in which the monotonous roar of the rushing train and the rattling of its joints drowned all other feelings and sensations, except now and then, when he sought to think of where he was going. He could not believe that the Sarkar could be actually fighting, that it could be taking him and all these hundreds of sepoys to kill other sepoys. But he knew for certain there was a war on, for even the army order that kept you in the dark about everything else had said so. And he was glad to be going to Vilayat, but he wished his regiment had been transferred to somewhere beyond the seas rather than ordered to a war where he might be killed.

But he slurred over the likelihood of that event and felt a glow of excitement suffuse his flesh. It was an escape from the village for some time. If he come back after a little time abroad, they would have forgotten things and perhaps he could resign through the help of some officer, and go back to the land. He must do that. He was determined.

His mother might be weeping, he thought, since he had written home that he had been ordered abroad. And his father? He had left directions on his pay-sheet for his emoluments to be sent to the old man. He might be ecovering, now that they could begin to pay back the debts. That would be one worry the less for Nihalu, though he had been so enfeebled by the shock of Sharm Singh's death

that he couldn't survive long. Lalu hoped, however, that the old man's will, which had prolonged his life over seventy odd years, would keep him alive till his son returned even though the old man was so stubborn.

But somehow he seemed to himself to have become callous with the excitement of being borne away to see the civilization of Vilayat, and all these considerations appeared as remote whispers which he had to make a special effort to beckon from the labyrinths of his mind. He had lent himself to sleep and to the monotonous roar of the train and the rattling of its joints.

And now as he sat with Kirpu and Dhanoo, waiting in the torturing suspense to receive orders to march down to the ships to embark, and looked out of the window across the torrid bright sun in the sky to the tall angrezi architecture of the broad streets, he already felt the exaltation of that otherness which he had anticipated.

And as the order came to form up and march down to the harbour, he jumped off the train with an alacrity which made Kirpu say, 'Look at him. He hasn't yet reached Vilayat, but he already thinks himself a Mishter Pleasant.'

'If fat blinds your eyes to the beauty of the universe, then why do you curse me for being happy?' Lalu gave his answer pat.

But as the column began to march through the shadow of three-storeyed commercial buildings and banks and clubs and offices, he felt a queer panic in his soul and couldn't enjoy the outlook of this resplendent new world. And although he did not believe in superstitions, he muttered to himself, 'I hope those words which Uncle Kirpu mouthed are not inauspicious. I hope he hasn't cast the hillman's evil eye on me.' And he felt his heart palpitating nervously as he marched to the rhythm of ammunition boots on the well-paved road, which smelt of tar and asphalt and oil and the salt of the sea.

As the columns turned from the main road towards the big godown on the quay, he read the huge letters 'Ralli Brothers, Exporters and Importers', embossed on a plate,

and as he rolled the word Ralli on his lips—such a nice familiar sound it seemed to have—he recalled that some of the sacks which his father used to bring home from the market in the town to fill with grain and take back loaded on carts to sell, were stamped in blue ink with the name of Ralli Brothers. How small the world was that Ralli Brothers should be here as well as in Manabad, and that their sacks should even get to Nandpur.

If only the peasants would know in what wonderful style the buyers of their grain lived, he thought, they would mend their own ways of living. But the peasants were poor and Ralli Brothers were probably Sahibs and must be rich, to judge by the imposing building on the harbour of Karachi. He wondered if those Sahibs were like the Indian merchants, and paid low prices for grain. If his father had sold grain to them they must have done. Or was it their agents, the Lallas, who cheated the farmers?

'The sea! The sea!' a cry came from the soldiers ahead. For with the salt breeze that came swishing past the godowns, through the palm-trees, there emerged a clear vision of a blue line lapping. And most of the sepoys, seeing the black water for the first time, almost broke their formations and rushed eagerly to feast their eyes, murmuring anxious little prayers and the various names of God.

Lalu walked rigidly along, however, only noticing that the blue water of the ocean took its colour from the sky, for it was muddy where the shadow of a cloud fell and a clear, crystal blue where the azure sky looked down.

As they came to 'Stand-ateeze' by the docks, they were ordered to take their kit up to the troopship which was waiting—a wonderful black hulk of a boat with *S.S. Mongara* written on it. The A Company was already on the move in single file. Each man was bearing his bag on his shoulder and stepping gingerly up the gangways suspended from the ship, while the other companies waited, when Havildar Lachman Singh came up to Lalu, bearing a packet of letters, and handed him a telegram, saying, 'This was forwarded to the ship from the depot for you.'

Lalu snatched at the flimsy envelope with 'Sepoy Lal

Singh, B Company, 68th Rifles' written on it, and knew what had happened.

And yet he hoped against hope that it was not about his father. He tore the envelope and unfolded the paper, nearly dropping his musket. 'Baba Nihalu passed away. Harnam Singh,' it read.

The boy just stared at the pink paper, stared at it without any emotion, and repeated the words to himself in a whisper, as if to excite some felling into his flesh. Then he turned to Lachman Singh with an abjectly apologetic smile and said : 'My father is dead.' And as he looked at the Havildar his lips quivered and he felt two tears come involuntarily to his eyes.

'I am very sorry, son,' said Lachman, looking back concernedly from where he was sorting other letters in his hand, and he paused and smacked sympathetically with his lips and waited for Lalu to lift his bent head and look at him. Then he said, 'Come, son, there is no talk, you must be strong : weakness is the sign of one who will be beaten,' and he turned away with a deliberate casualness as if he knew that it would be indelicate to intrude upon the boy's grief.

'There is no talk, son,' said Kirpu. 'All of us have to go, one by one. There is no talk. You are young and so long as there is breath, there is life. Death can only be kept at bay by laughter.'

Lalu still stood silent, only tightening his face to think, to think or to feel something. But all his blood seemed to have been congealed. Death seemed incomprehensible to him. Only fear loomed over his head.

'It is all the will of God, son,' said Daddy Dhanoo. 'It is inevitable. It is our karma. Only patience. It is all the will of God.'

'How old was he? What was wrong with him? What did he do?' Subah pelted Lalu with questions.

'Let us go,' said Lalu impatiently, 'our company is already moving there.'

He lifted the load on his shoulder and moved slowly up. The sepoys ahead of him were talking excitedly to each other and shouting greetings to those who had already

ascended the boat and stood on the deck looking down at the scene below. They seemed to be rather more human than they were ordinarily, but still essentially sepoys who lived to a routine, and didn't care for anything else, apart from their land perhaps now and then, and money, and occasionally their relatives.

'None of them can enter my skin,' he said to himself, 'and see it as I do. How the old man had struggled against the odds. He too must struggle.

And he crawled along like an ant behind the other ants, wishing he could realize what had happened, but incapable —because of the distance he had put between his father and himself—from feeling either sorrow or relief at the news of the old man's death. He looked across the slant of the gangway at the murky alleyway of sea-water that lay between the ship and the pier. And the vision of his father lying on the earth, swathed in red, came to his shead, and he nearly stumbled, but his attention was arrested by a British officer of the ship in a blue uniform, who stood at the head of the gangway. And he tramped up, ready to salute if necessary.

'Come, Lalu, let us inspect the ship,' Subah urged, tugging at his sleeve, when they had deposited their belongings. 'Come, Uncle Kirpu, come ohe, Dhanoo.'

Lalu followed him quietly, pleased at being on a ship, and then rebuked himself for being happy when his father had just died. And he sought to think of his father again, reminding himself that he should not forget to think. And as they turned a corner on the deck he slipped away and wandered off to the side of the boat which faced the sea where a number of Baluchis stood jabbering.

He moved near them and looked across the sea-waves to the horizon where the sun haze descended in a mist. And for a moment he thought of his mother, pale and worn, weeping and tearing her hair with grief. He knew that the women would be engaged in the ceremonial beating of their heads and their breasts for days after this death.

Beyond the quay, beyond the modern architecture of concrete, beyond the roofs of this city, his gaze travelled to

the vague shapes of the hovels and mud-huts of his village, where men and women and children would be huddled in the barn, sweating a nauseous ooze as they mourned for the old man. He could see himself whining in a corner of that room when his eldest brother had beaten him for not coming back early from school. He could feel his mother cursing and reviling Kesari in a sharp incessant voice, while Dayal Singh was singing hymns and trying to placate his eldest brother when the latter took up the cudgels on behalf of his wife against his mother. And he could sense the old man rising suddenly from a snoring slumber and howling like a mad dog in a stormy rage, dragging Gujri by the hair and striking Sharm Singh to quell the domestic wrangle. And now Sharm Singh was dead and the old man was dead and he, who had sat amongst them and judged them, was going far away. What would happen to him a pawn in the game?

The palm fronds swayed before him in a park where the surf broke upon the sandy shore, and he felt a soft wave of affection and kindnees seep through him. And he was inclined to forgive.

He looked nostalgically across Karachi, his gaze climbing the void of vast lands interspersed with towns and villages, to explore Nandpur.

But his vis'on could not define the contours of the village. It rested now on Gughi's face, now on the hind legs of Thiba and Rondu going round and round on the well; and then it quickly passed in array the shifty, squint-eyed, twisted lecherous face of Mahant Nandgir smoking hemp and coughing a thick yellow spittle; the refulgent beard of the landlord and the strained visage of Seth Chaman Lal lifting his rump to let loose a noise. The shapes were intangible, blurred in the distance, and faded quickly, leaving behind them mixed feelings which excited his nerves till he drummed with his fingers on the brass joints of the railings by which he stood, stole a quick, furtive glance at the soldiers about him to make sure that he wasn't being watched and stood, his heart palpitating, the back of his head drumming dully.

He had had a difficult time of it, he told himself. That absurd fuss about the long hair and then that incident about Maya. They did not understand, they did not see how her love had set him free during those days; they did not know how beautiful she was in his eyes! How soft and tender and alive! The bloom of good on her face and the pools of her big eyes, shining and lustrous in spite of all the books she read under the private tutorship of Master Hukam Chand—her hands, her feet, her lips, her hair, her breasts, her voice, her movements! What turbulent passions she had excited in him, what joy, what madness! How weak he had felt that night as he had held her in his arms when he bore her down from the hay-cart on the way to the fair, and how afraid, as if he had known that that moment was the last, the final moment, never to return again, as if he had known also that that moment would be his downfall.

The memory seemed to drain him of his blood now, till he was sweating from head to foot. It was only the excitement of this adventure, the congestion of the soldiers around him and this sudden news, he thought. And he looked through the dim rose-tinted mist towards the blazing beach to calm himself. But the memories of his life at home smiled through him, tugging at his heart in a desperate rush, so that their blurred edges left him impatient, and unsatisfied. He shook his head and looked across the coastland that spoke to the oncoming sea with a granite shiver as if it were in pain. And for a while his mind was empty.

Then he could feel the gaunt figure of Dayal Singh, ploughing placidly with the old plough whose point had not been sharpened for a year, with Thiba and Rondu pulling wearily before him. The figures persisted before his eyes under that merciless sky; Dayal Singh murmuring hymns and saying, 'God's will be done,' and the bullocks struggling against the earth as they stepped forward. And it seemed to him that the work would go on at home in spite of the death of his father and Sharm Singh and his own absence, in spite of the unsettled suit about the land, and in

spite of the loss of three more acres that had been sold to Fazlu to pay for his eldest brother's defence.

For though Dayal Singh seemed transcendental and nobly occupied with the things of the spirit, he was not quite indifferent to the things of the flesh. Indeed, his elder brother would probably become more of a materialist now that the responsibility of the whole household had devolved on him. The talk of the village when he last visited it had certainly been more of the needs of the body and the wherewithal that shall clothe it, of the coming rent day, of the iniquities of the landlord, of the prospects of the harvest and of the devious dirty ways of the Sahukar, Seth Chaman Lal.

'Ohe ohe, Lal Singh!' came Subha's blustering young voice. 'B Company is to gather on deck for orders. Come. Havildar Lachman is calling!' Lalu looked towards the boy whose face was set, and who neither answered nor moved, only muttering to himself 'Orders. . . .'

An eagle was circling in the sky over the godown on the pier and some seagulls whined over the shingle of the waves by the edge of the docks. His mother would say that God sent secret messages through birds and he felt how futile were her super-stitions.

'What do I really feel about Babu's death?' he wondered. There was no answer. Only a long row of fields unfolded themselves before his eyes, fields which were being furrowed by tall, unkempt, sweating peasants, who cursed the bullocks as they strained forward and heaved, digging the plough deep, deep into the moist layers of the earth. And the village of Nandpur stood in the red glow of the morning sun, with the broken walls of its decrepit houses pasted with cow-dung cakes on which the crows pecked as they cawed. And his mother was saying : 'Fly away crow, fly away. I will give you sweetbread, but what news have you brought of my son?'

And as these and other impressions of Nandpur swirled through him, he half-mumbled to the wind, as if it would carry his message to the village, 'I will come back to you; but not yet, not for a while.'

And as he said so, a sudden tremor went shooting through the nerves of his body. His hair stood on end and in the flash of one shattering moment, he felt relieved of all the sordid disturbances that had left him cold and heavy as a stone. He felt a peaceful stillness like an ecstasy about him. The sea swayed gaily under the sky, the white foam of the waves flashing and sparkling form the shoulders of a cliff as far as the eye could see, and the deep roar of its rebellions waters drowned the laughter and the talk of the sepoys.

'Ohe, come, ohe, Lalu!' he heard Subah's call again. 'The fatigue parties are forming.' Lalu turned and saw the sepoys of his platoon falling into line.

He stood, however, and contemplated the vast stretch of earth behind him, and the meeting of the sea and the sky before him. Then he shrugged his shoulders and ran along the decks towards the forming sepoys—



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